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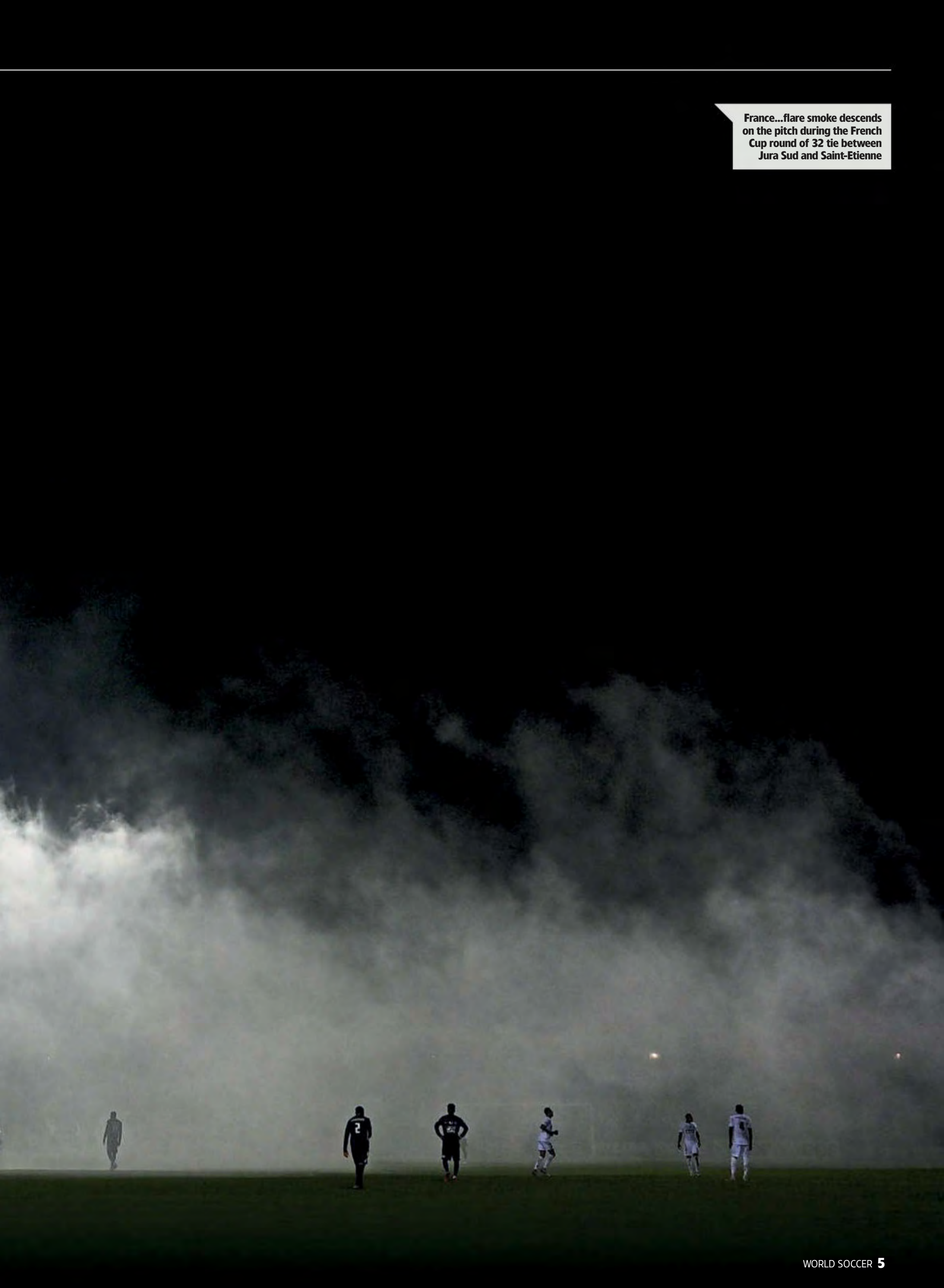

Argentina...a newly-unveiled mural of Lionel Messi in his home city of Rosario

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Honduras...fans of Olimpia celebrate their team winning the 2021 Apertura league title

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Netherlands...Feyenoord supporters attack a decoy Ajax bus with flares, while the real bus with Ajax players enters Rotterdam's De Kuip stadium

Qatar...Algeria lift the 2021 Arab Cup trophy after defeating African rivals Tunisia in the final

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FROM THE EDITOR

Although this is *World Soccer*'s February issue, it's our first edition with an on-sale date beginning in 2022, so it seems only fitting to preview the year ahead in some capacity. We've provided you with a football calendar for 2022 (opposite), while Nick Bidwell highlights the biggest talking points of the year in our regular annual preview (page 34).

With the Africa Cup of Nations well underway (see next month's issue for a full review) and the Women's Euro 2022 and Men's Qatar World Cup on the horizon, it's certainly going to be a big year. That being said, there are still plenty of current football matters that need addressing.

The January transfer window is in full flow (see page 18 for the month's early deals), while several domestic leagues were recently decided. We've collated reports from across the globe with help from our worldwide network of correspondents to provide you with comprehensive reviews from South America, United States, Mexico, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, as well as wrap-ups from the European summer domestic leagues, the FIFA Arab Cup and Southeast Asia's Suzuki Cup.

With the Women's Euro 2022 and Men's Qatar World Cup on the horizon, it's certainly going to be a big year

Aside from all that, we've got special reports on the contrasting fortunes of Mexico and Canada in the race to secure a World Cup qualifying berth from CONCACAF, an in-depth biography of Senegal and Chelsea's trailblazing goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, and exclusive interviews with Marcus Thuram, Peter Schmeichel and Jill Roord.

Plus, be sure to provide us with your opinion in our reader survey (see page 65 for details). With a closing date of January 31, 2022 to have your say, there's only a limited time left for you to help shape *World Soccer* going forward.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

Allies...CONMEBOL president Alejandro Dominguez (L) and UEFA's Aleksander Ceferin (R)

EUROPE & SOUTH AMERICA

FIFA hit back against Nations League proposals

FIFA will attempt to prevent South American countries from joining the European Nations League after plans for a revamped version of the competition were put forward by UEFA.

In December, UEFA vice-president Zbigniew Boniek revealed to Polish outlet *Meczyki* that: "From 2024 CONMEBOL will join the Nations League. We do not know yet in what form. We signed a memorandum about cooperation."

FIFA were enraged having not been informed of the proposals. If they withdraw their sanction of the Nations League, it would relegate its status to effectively that of a friendly tournament.

It has already been confirmed that Euro 2020 champions Italy will face Copa America holders Argentina this summer, in what could become a regular fixture between the continents' respective champions. The closer alliance between UEFA and CONMEBOL has come in the wake of FIFA's proposals for a biennial World Cup; an idea strongly opposed by UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin.

"The biennial World Cup is a political move because FIFA tries to weaken the European associations, take money from them and distribute it elsewhere, because that's politically appealing," the Slovenian told *Politico*.

"The project is an absolute no-go for us."

SPAIN

'Barcelona are back'

Barcelona president Joan Laporta has claimed that his team "are back" after the €55m signing of forward Ferran Torres from Manchester City.

"Everyone can get ready because Barca are back; the arrival of Ferran shows that," claimed Laporta at Torres' unveiling. "We're a reference. Barca's resurgence is a reality."

"To play the World Cup every two years would make this competition normal, and that should not be the case…We would have to play 60 games a year…If people want to see quality, I think we need a break"

Kylian Mbappe offers his opinion on plans for a biennial World Cup

While Laporta remains typically bullish, the Catalan club are still over €1 billion in debt, with a heavily restricted salary cap.

The move for Torres was facilitated by a €600m loan from Goldman Sachs, who will also help fund redevelopment of the Nou Camp. Yet the 21-year-old Spain international could not be registered immediately after his signing, with the club still exceeding their allocated budget.

Welcome… Laporta presents Barca's newest signing at the Nou Camp

EUROPE

Nations League draw

The draw has been made for the 2022-23 edition of the UEFA Nations League, beginning in June. The 2020-21 campaign concludes in March, as Cyprus face Estonia and Kazakhstan meet Moldova in the relegation play-outs.

GROUP A1
Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France
GROUP A2
Czech Republic, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland
GROUP A3
England, Germany, Hungary, Italy
GROUP A4
Belgium, Netherlands, Poland, Wales

GROUP B1
Armenia, Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Ukraine
GROUP B2
Albania, Iceland, Israel, Russia
GROUP B3
Bosnia-Herz, Finland, Montenegro, Romania
GROUP B4
Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden

GROUP C1
Faroe Islands, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Turkey
GROUP C2
Greece, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Cyprus/Estonia
GROUP C3
Azerbaijan, Belarus, Slovakia, Kazakhstan/Moldova
GROUP C4
Bulgaria, Georgia, Gibraltar, North Macedonia

GROUP D1
Andorra, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Kazakhstan/Moldova
GROUP D2
Malta, San Marino, Cyprus/Estonia

2022 Calendar

FEBRUARY
6 Africa Cup of Nations final
Women's Asian Cup final
27 English League Cup final

AFCON trophy …the final is in Yaounde

MARCH
6 FA Women's League Cup final
24 World Cup qualifiers – European play-off semi-finals
29 World Cup qualifiers – European play-off finals
TBC World Cup qualifiers – African play-off finals

APRIL
1 World Cup draw
23 Copa del Rey final
25 UEFA Youth League final

MAY
5 CONCACAF Champions League final
8 WSL final day
French Cup final
11 Italian Cup final
14 FA Cup final
Bundesliga final day
15 Women's FA Cup final
21 Ligue 1 final day
German Cup final
22 Women's Champions League final
Premier League final day
Serie A final day
La Liga final day
28 Champions League final
29 Championship play-off final

JUNE
1 Finalissima – Italy v Argentina
14 World Cup qualifiers – Intercontinental play-offs
AFC v CONMEBOL
CONCACAF v OFC
22 UEFA Nations League 2022-23 begins

JULY
2 Africa Women Cup of Nations begins
6 Women's European Championship begins
8 Copa America Femenina begins
20 European Under-19 Championship begins
23 Africa Women Cup of Nations final
30 Copa America Femenina final
31 Women's European Championship final

Women's Euros… Netherlands won the trophy in 2017

AUGUST
2 European Under-19 Championship final
5 New Bundesliga season begins
6 New Premier League season begins
New Ligue 1 season begins
10 UEFA Super Cup

SEPTEMBER
6 2022-23 Champions League group stage begins

OCTOBER
28 Copa Libertadores Femenina final
29 AFC Champions League final
Copa Libertadores final

NOVEMBER
13 Premier League mid-season break
21 World Cup begins

DECEMBER
18 World Cup final
26 Premier League resumes

Top prize… World Cup trophy

"The doctors told me straight up, 'that's enough'...I did everything possible. I dreamt about playing football since I was five years old and I first touched a ball...I'm proud of the career I've had"

Sergio Aguero speaking at his Barcelona press conference to announce his retirement from football

Sergio AGUERO

After the former Manchester City striker was forced to hang up his boots with a heart condition, we pick out some of the standout statistics from his career...

- Aguero was the youngest player in Argentine top-flight history when he made his debut for Independiente as a 15-year-old in 2003.
- Atletico Madrid broke their transfer record to sign him for €20m in 2006.
- With 184 goals, Aguero is the fourth-highest goalscorer in Premier League history, the most prolific foreign player ever in the competition, and holds the record for the most goals at one club.
- He scored at least 20 goals in five consecutive seasons, a record he shares with Arsenal legend Thierry Henry.
- He is one of five players to score five goals in one Premier League match.
- Nobody has scored more Premier League hat-tricks than Aguero's 12.
- During his Manchester City career he was named Premier League Player of the Month on seven occasions – more than any other player.
- Aguero has the best strike rate in Premier League history, averaging a goal every 108 minutes.
- Nobody has scored more goals in the Champions League for an English club (36), a record he shares with former Chelsea superstar Didier Drogba.
- He lies third in Argentina's list of all-time top scorers with 42 goals, and is one of only seven players to win over 100 caps for the South Americans.
- His last-ever career goal was in Barca's 2-1 defeat to *Clasico* rivals Real Madrid in October, taking his overall tally to 427.

VANDERSON
(Monaco)
The Ligue 1 side spent a reported €11 million to sign the 20-year-old attacking full-back from Gremio.

Joris GNAGNON
(Saint-Etienne)
Formerly a highly-rated young centre-back, he was released by Sevilla in September for a "lack of professionalism". His new club hope to tap into his undoubted potential.

Brian BROBBEY
(Ajax)
After nine Bundesliga games without a goal for RB Leipzig, the exciting young striker has re-joined Ajax on loan for the rest of the campaign, having walked out on his hometown club last summer.

Nathan PATTERSON
(Everton)
Everton's new £12 million signing from Rangers has six Scotland caps and was part of Steve Clarke's Euro 2020 squad, coming off the bench against Croatia.

Ricardo PEPI
(Augsburg)
After being named USA's Young Player of the Year for 2021, the 19-year-old striker completed a transfer to the Bundesliga for €17.75 million – the second-biggest MLS departure ever.

Charlie SAVAGE
(Manchester United)
Savage's Champions League debut was made all the more remarkable by the fact that his father, Robbie, was watching on from the commentary box.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	11
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	11
Ederson (Manchester City)	5
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	5
David Ospina (Napoli)	4
David De Gea (Manchester United)	3
Alisson (Liverpool)	2
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Bono (Sevilla)	1
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	1
Mark Flekken (Freiburg)	1
Alfred Gomis (Rennes)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Maty Ryan (Real Sociedad)	1

DEFENDERS

Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	23
Kalidou Koulibaly (Napoli)	17
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	14
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	13
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	10
Marquinhos (PSG)	9
Antonio Rudiger (Chelsea)	9
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	8
Reece James (Chelsea)	7
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	7
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	6
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	6
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	6
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	4
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	4
Milan Skriniar (Internazionale)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Marcos Alonso (Chelsea)	3
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	3
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	2
Davide Calabria (Milan)	2
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	2
Aymeric Laporte (Manchester City)	2
Joel Matip (Liverpool)	2
Kieran Tierney (Arsenal)	2
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	2
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	1
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea)	1
Jerome Boateng (Lyon)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Andreas Christensen (Chelsea)	1
Aaron Cresswell (West Ham United)	1
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Merih Demiral (Atalanta)	1
Aritz Elustondo (Real Sociedad)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Grimaldo (Benfica)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Gonzalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Jules Kounde (Sevilla)	1
Philipp Lienhart (Freiburg)	1
Lisandro Martinez (Ajax)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Jesus Navas (Sevilla)	1
Jose Luis Palomino (Atalanta)	1
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	1
Mario Rui (Napoli)	1
Mamadou Sakho (Montpellier)	1
Chris Smalling (Roma)	1
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	1
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Lucas Verissimo (Benfica)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	12
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	12
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	10
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	7
Jorginho (Chelsea)	7
Idrissa Gueye (PSG)	5
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	5
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	5
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	5
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	4
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	4
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	3
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	3
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Marcelo Brozovic (Internazionale)	2
Fabian (Napoli)	2
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	2
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	2
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	2
Declan Rice (West Ham United)	2
Rodri (Manchester City)	2
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	2
Thiago (Liverpool)	2
Sandro Tonali (Milan)	2
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	1
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Steven Berghuis (Ajax)	1
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Kai Havertz (Chelsea)	1
Ander Herrera (PSG)	1
Manuel Locatelli (Juventus)	1
Lovro Majer (Rennes)	1
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	1
Lucas Ocampos (Sevilla)	1
Otavio (Porto)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Dimitri Payet (Marseille)	1
Paul Pogba (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
Teji Savanier (Montpellier)	1
Youri Tielemans (Leicester City)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Axel Witsel (Borussia Dortmund)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	40
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	31
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	15
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	14
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	7
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	7
Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United)	5
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	5
Sebastien Haller (Ajax)	4
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	4
Dusan Vlahovic (Fiorentina)	4
Luis Diaz (Porto)	3
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	3
Raheem Sterling (Manchester City)	3
Karim Adeyemi (Red Bull Salzburg)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Romelu Lukaku (Chelsea)	2
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	2
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	2
Lionel Messi (PSG)	2
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Giovanni Simeone (Verona)	2
Duvan Zapata (Atalanta)	2
Memphis Depay (Barcelona)	1
Breel Embolo (B. M'gladbach)	1
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	1
Lorenzo Insigne (Napoli)	1
Alexander Isak (Real Sociedad)	1
Gerard Moreno (Villarreal)	1
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	1

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Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

English football must address its relationship with gambling

Just over three years ago, after all the fuss and fun of the 2018 World Cup had faded into summer holidays, pre-season training and a new club season, one further fascinating finals statistic slipped out.

FIFA's consultant Sportradar revealed that a phenomenal €136 billion had been turned over by the worldwide betting industry during the tournament. The average match at the finals generated an official €2.1bn with the final between Croatia and France spiralling an estimated €7.2bn.

For context, FIFA's entire World Cup revenue added up to a measly €5.6bn.

That €136bn was a computation for the legal, authorised betting industry. Turnover of unregulated betting, sometimes labelled "illegal", may have been ten, 20 or 100 times as much. Who knows?

This was the money machine whirring throughout one single, month-long tournament. Computing how much is gambled on football around the world all year round is impossible. Intelligent estimates suggest that if regulated and unregulated betting were a nation state, it would be one of the five richest in the world.

The lurking challenge for sport in general and football in particular from the dark corners of the gambling empire is a regular theme of well-meaning conferences and worthy statements of combative intent. But the long shadow of a depressing history continues to haunt the game.

Witness the tangle in which Jude Bellingham landed after failing to count to ten after Borussia Dortmund's Bundesliga defeat by Bayern Munich.

Bellingham incurred a €40,000 fine from the German DFB after whingeing about referee Felix Zwayer. The FIFA official had awarded a decisive penalty and, in the heat of a post-match moment, the England midfielder told a TV interviewer:

Rife...almost half of Premier League clubs are sponsored by gambling firms, including Brentford, Leeds, West Ham and Newcastle

"You give a referee, that's match-fixed before, the biggest game in Germany. What do you expect?"

More than a decade ago Zwayer was one of four Berlin referees whose evidence uncovered a Croat betting and match-fixing ring that had manipulated a referee named Robert Hoyzer.

Zwayer was later banned for six months because he delayed in reporting his suspicions. Once reinstated, he was appointed to the FIFA list in 2015 and was a VAR official at the 2018 World Cup and at the 2019 Women's World Cup. He refereed the German Cup final in 2018 and the Greek Cup final in 2019. Hoyzer, for the record, was banned for life and jailed. But he was just a tip of the European iceberg.

Germany is one of many European countries that, along with FIFA and UEFA, have long since commissioned monitoring to flag up suspect betting patterns on particular matches.

But a wide-open back door stands open to betting ring manipulators. The nature of the match is irrelevant. Indeed, the ideal fixed game is not

to be viewed worldwide from the Premier League, La Liga or Serie A. Most likely it is down in some mid-Eurasian second or third division.

Fixed without trace; a corrupting contagion of football. The only "vaccination" is the education of players and referees and prospect of swingeing punishments for the guilty.

But it's a losing battle. Even containing the disease is proving more and more difficult. In the words of Emanuel Macedo de Medeiros, CEO of the Sports Integrity Global Alliance: "We are not winning this fight. We are losing it big time". And that was three years ago.

Football must worry at its continued vulnerability to betting-driven corruption and manipulation. The consequences reach out far beyond sport to the societal damage of organised crime on the one hand and disorganised individual addiction on the other.

This is why a UK governmental delay in tightening the rules and regulations around gambling – and, particularly, football-linked promotion – is so depressing.

Once upon a time football betting was simple. Pools, the apparently harmless weekly results predictions, were run by local and national companies in the UK and by nationalised monopolies – the Toto – in central Europe. Sport took a commission for fixtures access and even fuelled the industry: the Intertoto Cup was a club competition which kept the continental pools ticking over from the 1960s to the 1980s during the summer close-season.

But that was as nothing compared with today.

The advent of the Internet and cable/satellite television has laid open live, in-game betting opportunities from Manchester to Malaysia.

Betting and gambling will always be interwoven in sport. Indeed, some sports were created and maintained by the betting industry – horse racing the most obvious. Far too late, the accompanying societal damage awakened politicians to the tidal wave of betting promotion in English football.

The English game is especially significant because the Premier League is the world's most-viewed football competition. Its influence is vast. Hence also the unprecedented reach available to sponsors. Nothing like it has been seen before. Literally.

Intelligent estimates suggest that if regulated and unregulated betting were a nation state, it would be one of the five richest in the world

In 2019-20, ethical and moral considerations were absent with half the Premier League wearing betting sponsor names in return for $100m, which accounted for nearly ten per cent of total sponsorship income. The financial devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the power and/or temptation of signing up with the betting business.

Yet many of the betting firms whose strange names plaster players' shirts and the electronic hoardings are siphoning off their profits on the other side of the world. Ownership is not so much murky as hidden.

As *The Times* noted recently: "Clubs including Manchester United, Everton, Arsenal, Southampton and Watford are sponsored by four overseas betting platforms that all use a 'white label' arrangement – where a service is produced by one company with a view to another company branding it as their own."

More than two years ago the UK government promised a root and branch review and reform of the betting industry. Publication of its Gambling Review, expected to recommend an end to shirt adverts by betting firms, has been delayed. Legislation is not likely until later this year and, let's face it, probably not even then.

Meanwhile the business keeps turning over. Why not? It's legitimate. Sky screens almost all the live Premier League football and there is no escaping its betting cousin, SkyBet. Some gambling firms sponsor sports media organisations and their awards. The fox is in the chicken house.

Where is the balance between income and independence, the balance in sport between credibility and corruption, the balance in society between individual freedom and fallibility?

No easy answers of course. This is one issue on which football's guard should never be relaxed. But there are doors and windows that can be shut. The black market may be beyond control but that is no excuse for inaction. This is not about prohibition but responsibility. Complacent, paper-shuffling delay in Whitehall is no help for anyone; in football or beyond.

Fined...Bellingham was punished for his comments after Dortmund v Bayern

Matchday betting...most UK grounds have an onsite bookmakers

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

PSG are a broken team

When Paris Saint-Germain signed Lionel Messi, what did they expect? Of course there were all the benefits for their brand, and to land a player widely accepted as one of the best in history emphasised their status. The fact that the financial issues that meant Barcelona had to release him were in part provoked by the club's panicked reaction to PSG's audacious signing of Neymar can only have made his arrival sweeter: a vindication of that €222 million outlay in 2017.

But presumably, there was also the thought that Messi would bring football of attacking luminosity. You have Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, two of the greatest forwards in the world, and you add another great forward: the result, surely, must be great forward play? But football doesn't work like that. It is one of its great strengths as a sport that it is formed of a series of interlocking paradoxes, that it resists overly simplistic interpretation. That is why, for all the iniquities and flaws of the superclub era, it has resisted the onslaught of ultra-capital far better than might realistically have been expected. Tactical expertise still matters.

It's an issue Messi has faced at national level as well, particularly

Not clicking... Messi, Neymar and Mbappe at the Etihad

around a decade ago, when Argentina had an absurd glut of talented attacking players: not just Messi, but Sergio Aguero, Ezequiel Lavezzi, Javier Pastore, Gonzalo Higuain, Angel Di Maria, Carlos Tevez and Diego Milito. The argument was always to try to pack as many of them as possible – four, five or even six – into a side and assume that would somehow produce great waves of attacking football. But that's not how the game works any more: this is not like the late 1950s, when Real Madrid could shove a load of great forwards together – Alfredo Di Stefano, Ferenc Puskas, Paco Gento, Luis del Sol, Raymond Kopa – and expect them to work it out.

It's something you often used to hear from England fans after another humbling international tournament: "I just want us to attack." Which is fine, and clearly some styles of football are more attacking than others, but before you can attack you have to have the ball. And that means that you need players to win the ball. But more than that, even your forwards have to be able to work together. Argentina's progress to the World Cup final in 2014 came with just three forwards – Messi, Higuain and Lavezzi – supported by a tenacious midfield trio of Javier Mascherano, Enzo Perez and Lucas Biglia.

Under pressure...Mauricio Pochettino

Mauricio Pochettino has ended up pursuing a similar policy at Paris Saint-Germain. In the Champions League home game against Manchester City, a 2-0 win that remains their best result under Pochettino, the front three players combined nicely for the two goals, but the win was based on the performance of the midfield three of Ander Herrera, Marco Verratti and Idrissa Gana Gueye, who sat very deep protecting the back four.

It was, essentially, a 4-3-0-3 formation, a broken team. The urge to play three great forwards, none of them especially diligent in the performance of their defensive responsibilities, none of whom can be relied upon in a coherent pressing system without major modifications, actually mitigates against playing fluent attacking football. The need to compensate for their shortcomings means PSG have to play defensive, counter-attacking football.

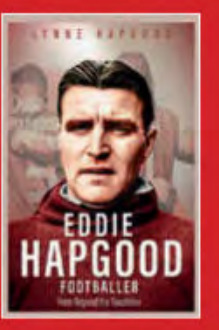
> That was PSG, who dream of being one of the world's great clubs, playing against Manchester City like a relegation-haunted Premier League club

Whether that can work in the long-term in the Champions League is debatable. PSG, of course, will win Ligue 1, as they always should given the vast financial advantages they enjoy over the rest of the division. But higher calibre sides may be able to exploit that huge space between the front-line and the midfield. That City ended up being beaten quite comfortably was probably more to do with their struggles scoring goals at that point of the season. City had 18 shots to PSG's six in that game.

They had a lot of the ball just inside the PSG half and, with an orthodox centre-forward, may have had more joy with crosses into the box. As it was, their passing game faltered against a deep-lying block of seven. But that was PSG, who dream of being one of the world's great clubs, playing against City like a relegation-haunted Premier League club – albeit one that had Messi, Neymar and Mbappe up front. Maybe the hordes of celebrities who turn up at the Parc des Princes don't much care, but is this the football of which they dreamed? Sitting deep, absorbing pressure, and very occasionally getting the ball up to the glittering trident?

It's certainly not the integrated, modern football that Pochettino played at Tottenham, or even at Southampton and Espanyol, and that probably means there is a ceiling on how far they can go. And that is one of the beautiful mysteries of football: attacking players do not necessarily lead to attacking football.

BOOKS THIS MONTH



EDDIE HAPGOOD, FOOTBALLER
By Lynne Hapgood (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

The story of a young unknown from Bristol who became Arsenal and England captain in the 1930s. Hapgood considered football an art, playing it joyously, but struggled when politics, class and money threatened to corrupt football. And by the late 1930s, fascism, Nazism and looming war were bearing down on the beautiful game. In this gripping memoir, his daughter pulls together the various threads – success, celebrity, tragedy and vindication – to reveal the real Eddie Hapgood.

"I HOPE YOU DIE OF CANCER"
By Marvin Close (Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

A million miles away from the Premier League lies the world of non-league football: a far grittier version of the beautiful game. Footballer X lifts the lid on never-before-told stories of dust-ups, bust-ups, backhanders and betting scandals. Our footballer is still playing, so the cloak of anonymity allows him to give us a true picture of what life is really like playing as a non-league footballer today.

"The interview was about saying goodbye to the Inter fans, and it wasn't about trying to disrespect the [Chelsea] fans, my team-mates, the club and the manager"

Romelu Lukaku addresses his comments saying that he would like to return to Internazionale

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

England regular... Newcastle new boy Kieran Trippier

EUROPE

Newcastle United's Saudi owners made **KIERAN TRIPPIER** their first major signing, capturing the England full-back from La Liga champions Atletico Madrid for £12 million.

Watford completed the double defensive signings of Ivorian **HASSANE KAMARA** from Nice and Brazilian **SAMIR** from Udinese.

Brighton signed 18-year-old Poland midfielder **KACPER KOZLOWSKI**, before allowing striker **JURGEN LOCADIA** to join Bochum on a free transfer the following day.

Joining fellow full-back **NATHAN PATTERSON** at Everton is Ukrainian international **VITALIY MYKOLENKO**.

Aston Villa agreed to sign **PHILIPPE COUTINHO** on loan from Barcelona.

Hearts signed Australia right-back **NATHANIEL ATKINSON** from Melbourne City. Scottish rivals Celtic announced the triple signing of Japan stars **DAIZEN MAEDA**, **REO HATATE** and **YOSUKE IDEGUCHI**, while their compatriot **HAYAO KAWABE** moved to Wolves in England before being loaned back to Grasshoppers.

Defender **KOSTAS MANOLAS** returned home to Greece, joining Olympiakos from Roma for €2.5m.

Everton's £17.7m signing...Vitaliy Mykolenko

Fiorentina completed the signing of France forward **JONATHAN IKONE** from Lille for around €14m, while Venezia snapped up French midfielder **MICHAEL CUISANCE** from Bayern Munich for €4.5m.

After the departure of American coach Jesse Marsch, RB Leipzig hired former Spartak Moscow boss **DOMENICO TEDESCO**.

Tedesco...New RB Leipzig boss

Former Brazil and Barcelona midfielder **RAFINHA** joined Real Sociedad on loan for the rest of the campaign from Paris Saint-Germain.

Former Scotland international **SHAUN MALONEY** was appointed manager of Scottish Premiership side Hibernian to replace Jack Ross. Elsewhere, **DEREK MCINESS** was appointed to replace Tommy Wright at Kilmarnock.

Monaco hired Club Brugge coach **PHILIPPE CLEMENT** to replace Niko Kovac. Ligue 1 strugglers Saint-Etienne appointed **PASCAL DUPRAZ**, while **BRUNO IRLES** joined Troyes.

AFRICA

On the eve of AFCON 2021, Nigeria appointed former international **AUGUSTINE EGUAVOEN** for his second spell as manager to replace Gernot Rohr.

ASIA

Qatari side Al Ahli snapped up Spanish playmaker **JOSE POZO** on loan from Rayo Vallecano.

CONCACAF

In MLS, Costa Rica forward **ARIEL LASSITER** left Houston Dynamo for Inter Miami, while his old club hired **PAULO NAGAMURA** to replace Tab Ramos as head coach.

Los Angeles FC hired coach **STEVE CHERUNDOLO** after **BOB BRADLEY** left to join Toronto FC, while USMNT striker **DARYL DIKE** left Orlando City to be reunited with his former manager Valerien Ismael at West Bromwich Albion in the English Championship.

SOUTH AMERICA

Flamengo appointed **PAULO SOUSA** as their new manager to replace Renato Gaucho, shortly after the Portuguese coach left his role as Poland boss.

Uruguay appointed former Inter Miami manager **DIEGO ALONSO** as their new coach following the departure of Oscar Tabarez.

Diego Alonso...Uruguay's new manager

Cruzeiro signed defender **SIDNEI** following his release from Real Betis.

"Aaron Ramsey returned today after his leave to work in England, but he is an outgoing player"

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri confirms that Wales international Ramsey will leave the Turin club in January

Appointments, sackings and loans

Free agent... Tomasson

Retiring... Coloccini

EUROPE

Former Brighton midfielder **DAVY PROPPER**, who joined PSV last summer, announced his retirement from football at the age of 30, saying he "doesn't feel comfortable in the world of football".

After guiding Malmo to back-to-back Swedish league titles, **JON DAHL TOMASSON** stepped down as coach.

CONCACAF

Peru midfielder **YOSHIMAR YOTUN** left Cruz Azul after two years in Mexico.

SOUTH AMERICA

Former Argentina international and Newcastle United captain **FABRICIO COLOCCINI** announced his retirement following a season with Aldosivi.

Fan pressure ends Jesus' second Benfica spell

Benfica have parted company with coach Jorge Jesus, midway through his second season at the club after being reappointed in 2020.

Between 2009 and 2015, Jesus won three Portuguese league titles, multiple domestic cups and reached two Europa League finals, but his second spell was far less successful.

As the Lisbon club struggled to keep pace with league leaders Porto and Sporting, Jesus became increasingly unpopular amongst his own fans, to the extent that some set up a website called "Give back Jesus". The homepage shows a small icon of the manager on a world map, and every click of the "*clica para devolver*" button moves him 0.1 kilometres closer to his previous club, Flamengo.

Unpopular... Jorge Jesus

After his departure, the page now simply reads: "Success. Thanks to all supporters who drove him away from Benfica."

OBITUARIES

Jiri CADEK (1935-2021)
A Dukla Prague legend, winning seven Czechoslovak league titles and three cups, Cadek played over 300 league games in 17 years at the club.

Raul MADERO (1939-2021)
After a playing career that saw him star in the Estudiantes side that won three consecutive Copas Libertadores, Madero studied medicine specialising in sport. In 1983, former team-mate Carlos Bilardo appointed him physician for the Argentine national team, and he remained in the post for both the victorious 1986 World Cup campaign and Italia '90. He returned to the post again in 2007, working with another former team-mate, Alfio Basile.

Physio...Madero (R) with ex-Argentina boss Basile

Osagi BASCOME (1998-2021)
A Bermuda international who spent his youth career at Aston Villa, Bristol City, Valencia and Levante. In December he was killed after being stabbed outside a restaurant on St David's Island, Bermuda.

Juan FIGER (1934-2021)
Prolific agent who represented a number of high-profile, mostly Brazilian, players. Figer was involved in some of the most significant deals of the century, including Luis Figo's highly-controversial transfer from Barcelona to Real Madrid. He also brokered Robinho's move from Santos to Real Madrid, as well as his subsequent £32.5m transfer to Manchester City – a then-Premier League record.

Hugo MARADONA (1969-2021)
The younger brother of Diego had a nomadic career, starting at Argentinos Juniors before going on to play in Italy, Spain, Austria, Venezuela, Uruguay and Japan. In 1987 he was signed by Napoli to link-up with his older brother, but was loaned out to Ascoli. He did return to Naples after his career, and was working as a youth coach until his death.

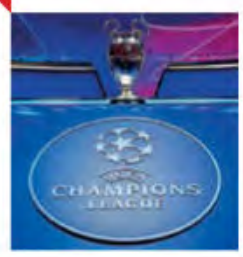
Tragic...Bascome representing Bermuda

Gyan...the Ghanaian in action for Feyenoord

Anatoliy KUKSOV (1949-2022)
A one-club man who spent his 19-year playing career with Zorya Luhansk. After retiring, he became manager of the club, taking charge of over 100 games in two spells. His final football role came in 2015, when he took charge of the national team of the Luhansk People's Republic, an unrecognised region of Ukraine.

Jimmy ROBSON (1939-2021)
By scoring Burnley's equaliser against Tottenham in 1962, Robson became the scorer of the 100th FA Cup final goal. The Clarets legend lies in eighth on the club's list of all-time top scorers with 100 goals. After helping Burnley win the 1959-60 First Division title, he scored 37 goals in all competitions the following season – a joint-club record – including three en route to the European Cup quarter-finals.

Christian GYAN (1978-2021)
A Ghanaian international, Gyan made his name at Feyenoord as a right-back. After helping the team win the Eredivisie title in 1998-99, he started in the 2002 UEFA Cup final as the Dutch side got their hands on the trophy with a memorable 3-2 win over Borussia Dortmund in Rotterdam.



"Following a technical problem with the software of an external service provider that instructs the officials as to which teams are eligible to play each other, a material error occurred in the draw"

UEFA declare their initial Champions League round of 16 draw "void" and that it would be "entirely redone"

A new way forward

This season's knockout games in UEFA's elite competitions will be without the away goals rule for the first time since the 1960s

Champions League final...Krestovsky Stadium, Saint Petersburg

Champions League

ROUND OF 16 FIRST LEGS

FEBRUARY 15
Paris Saint-Germain v Real Madrid
Sporting v Manchester City
FEBRUARY 16
Red Bull Salzburg v Bayern Munich
Internazionale v Liverpool
FEBRUARY 22
Chelsea v Lille
Villarreal v Juventus
FEBRUARY 23
Atletico Madrid v Manchester United
Benfica v Ajax

SECOND LEGS

MARCH 8
Bayern Munich v Red Bull Salzburg
Liverpool v Internazionale
MARCH 9
Manchester City v Sporting
Real Madrid v Paris Saint-Germain
MARCH 15
Ajax v Benfica
Manchester United v Atletico Madrid
MARCH 16
Juventus v Villarreal
Lille v Chelsea

QUARTER-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 5/6
SECOND LEGS: April 12/13

SEMI-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 26/27
SECOND LEGS: May 3/4

FINAL

MAY 28
Krestovsky Stadium, Saint Petersburg

Europa League

KNOCKOUT ROUND PLAY-OFFS

FIRST LEGS: February 17
SECOND LEGS: February 24
Sevilla v Dinamo Zagreb
Atalanta v Olympiakos
RB Leipzig v Real Sociedad
Barcelona v Napoli
Zenit Saint Petersburg v Real Betis
Borussia Dortmund v Rangers
Sheriff Tiraspol v Braga
Porto v Lazio

EIGHT GROUP WINNERS ADVANCE DIRECTLY TO ROUND OF 16

Lyon, Monaco, Spartak Moscow, Eintracht Frankfurt, Galatasaray, Red Star Belgrade, Bayer Leverkusen, West Ham United

ROUND OF 16

DRAW: February 25
FIRST LEGS: March 10
SECOND LEGS: March 17

QUARTER-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 7
SECOND LEGS: April 14

SEMI-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 28
SECOND LEGS: May 5

FINAL

MAY 18
Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan, Seville

Europa Conference League

KNOCKOUT ROUND PLAY-OFFS

FIRST LEGS: February 17
SECOND LEGS: February 24
Marseille v Qarabag
PSV v Maccabi Tel Aviv
Fenerbahce v Slavia Prague
Midtjylland v PAOK
Leicester City v Randers
Celtic v Bodo/Glimt
Sparta Prague v Partizan Belgrade
Rapid Vienna v Vitesse

EIGHT GROUP WINNERS ADVANCE DIRECTLY TO ROUND OF 16

LASK, Gent, Roma, AZ, Feyenoord, Copenhagen, Rennes, Basel

ROUND OF 16

DRAW: February 25
FIRST LEGS: March 10
SECOND LEGS: March 17

QUARTER-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 7
SECOND LEGS: April 14

SEMI-FINALS

DRAW: March 18
FIRST LEGS: April 28
SECOND LEGS: May 5

FINAL

MAY 25
Arena Kombetare, Tirana

WorldSoccer

NEXT MONTH

Champions League, Europa League & Europa Conference League knockout stage previews

- AFCON 2021 REVIEW & SQUADS
- OCEANIA WC QUALIFYING KICK-OFF
- CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE WRAP-UP

ON SALE FEBRUARY 18

Canada

The Canucks are on course to reach their first World Cup since 1986

The successful North American bid to hold the 2026 World Cup across three countries will see Canada host the men's tournament for the first time.

The 23rd edition of football's global gathering will span the continent, including cities in Mexico and the United States as well as Canada, with the three nations expected to qualify automatically as hosts for what will be the first 48-team tournament.

Winning hosting duties meant that Canada would be guaranteed a spot at the men's World Cup for the first time since 1986 – their only appearance in the finals to date. As it turns out, 2026 could well be their second World Cup in a row.

Canada's performances in the CONCACAF section of qualifying for the 2022 World Cup have seen them top the third-round eight-team group with six matchdays to go.

The United States and Mexico are considered the heavyweights of the region, despite the former failing to qualify for Russia 2018, and both sit in the top 15 of FIFA's rankings.

Canada recently moved up to 40th, tying their best-ever position in the rankings, but more tellingly, a 1-1 draw with Mexico in Mexico City in October and a 2-1 victory against the same opponent in Edmonton in November showed they mean business heading into the last six games.

Canada are in this position thanks to a talented group of players, all at various stages in their careers, who have been arranged into an impressive unit by English head coach John Herdman.

The star of the show is Bayern Munich's Alphonso Davies – a genuine world-class talent in his left-back position. For his country he is usually required further forward, often playing as a winger on either flank, and even starting as a striker in October.

At the moment, Davies is arguably the best player from the CONCACAF region, but Canada are a long way from a one-man team.

In form...Canada's players celebrate a goal during World Cup qualifying

They have a number of quality players including forwards Cyle Larin of Besiktas and Lille's Jonathan David.

Larin recently drew level with Dwayne De Rosario as Canada's all-time top scorer on 22 goals, and both he and David are likely to go some way beyond De Rosario's record.

In terms of goals per game, David leads the way by some distance: the 22-year-old has scored 18 times in just 22 caps.

Having caught the eye at Belgian side Gent, David was soon of interest to clubs across Europe's top five leagues, eventually moving to Lille.

With 13 goals, he played his part in the French side's shock Ligue 1 title-winning season, with 11 of those coming in the second half of the campaign during the all-important run-in as they finished one point ahead of Paris Saint-Germain.

Lille have not been as impressive in the league this season, but David has been in prolific form. He has already overtaken last season's tally, thanks in part to three Champions League goals. Lille topped Group G, continuing last season's form in Europe if not domestically.

Canada are in this position thanks to a talented group of players, all at various stages in their careers, who have been arranged into an impressive unit by English head coach John Herdman

Star man...Bayern's Alphonso Davies

Belgium may prove to be a springboard for another young Canadian, Tajon Buchanan. The 22-year-old joined Club Brugge this January having impressed in Major League Soccer with New England Revolution. Like Davies, Buchanan is able to play as a full-back but can also do damage from the wings thanks to his speed, skill and attacking instinct.

The Belgian league is also home to a recent Canada convert, Ike Ugbo. The 23-year-old Genk forward was eligible to represent Nigeria, the country of his parents, and England, his country of birth, but he chose Canada.

Elsewhere in Europe, 34-year-old goalkeeper Milan Borjan has been a regular in the Europa League for Red Star Belgrade, while former Liverpool youth player Liam Millar, 22, has appeared for Basel in the Europa Conference League.

Closer to home, Toronto FC teenagers Jayden Nelson and Jahkeele Marshall-Rutty are also highly rated and could be in the picture come 2026. Marshall-Rutty has been training with European clubs including Arsenal and Liverpool during the MLS off-season and will be on the radar of many sides once he turns 18 in June.

It's not all about the youngsters, though. At 26, Larin is in his prime years and is a key player for Besiktas where he plays alongside a Canada national team legend, Atiba Hutchinson.

Hutchinson is in the twilight of his playing career, but the 38-year-old captain is an important presence for Canada and recently overtook Julian de Guzman on the country's all-time appearances chart having returned to the fold for the recent qualifiers.

The squad is bolstered by a group of steady but talented squad players who largely ply their trade for the nation's three MLS sides: Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver Whitecaps.

It's all brought together by the preparation and man-management of the man from County Durham, Herdman, who previously coached the Canada women's team, and whose tactics can differ from game to game depending on the opponent and the conditions.

The team also used the Canadian climate to their advantage for the home game against Mexico, playing it in chilly Edmonton where temperatures dropped as low as -10 degrees, making it the coldest game on record for Mexico. No stone is going unturned and no potential advantage wasted.

Even though we are already into the World Cup year, there is still a long way to go for Herdman's side and a lot can happen in the remaining six matches.

Up next is the USA in Hamilton. Last September, the two sides met in Nashville and played out a 1-1 draw, one of four draws that Canada have picked up so far. Their other four games have been wins, meaning that the Canucks remain the only unbeaten side among the eight teams vying for CONCACAF's three automatic qualification spots.

With 18 points left to play for and no easy fixtures, Canada will have to end their qualification campaign as they started it. Given the talent at their disposal, they are more than capable of doing so.

James Nalton

Mastermind... Canada coach John Herdman

Samuel Eto'o

Legendary striker elected president of the Cameroon Football Federation

Political forces were widely ranged up against him, but in the end the star appeal of Samuel Eto'o saw him win a high-profile election as the new president of the Cameroon Football Federation, just over a month before his country began the hosting of the Africa Cup of Nations finals.

It is no dream job in a country horribly short of resources. The federation has little cash and a long history of being dictated to by the country's octogenarian president, Paul Biya, as well as a multitude of miscreant sports ministers who have come and gone in a rapid procession over the decades.

But there will be the hope that Eto'o's intimate knowledge of the foibles of Cameroon football will be able to elevate the Indomitable Lions back to their previous lofty position in the African game.

He will have witnessed countless previous squabbles over unpaid or missing cash and bonuses for the players, botched pre-tournament preparations and presumably been dismayed by a steady stream of dubiously-suitable coaches appointed to handle the team.

A president who is on the players' side, understands their travails and is not in the job to fill his own pockets and elevate his profile will be a refreshing change.

The four-time African Footballer of the Year unseated the incumbent Seidou Mbombo Njoya, who was also a Confederation of African Football (CAF) vice-president and scion of a powerfully connected family. The vote of the 74 delegates to the federation's congress finished 43-31 after Eto'o had conducted a slick campaign and made a point of travelling widely in the country in search of support.

It was a closely-watched affair, especially as Njoya was presumed to have the tacit support of Gianni Infantino, in spite of the FIFA president's groupie-like love of surrounding himself with former stars, and Eto'o was by no means certain of success.

He has promised he will take no cent from the federation's coffers for his expenses. His manifesto, which he released as early as September, promised a revival of Cameroonian football, whose league structures are threadbare and a long way from their glory days of the 1970s and '80s when their clubs regularly competed for the top African club titles. Eto'o said he would also search for sponsors and ensure youth and women's football development.

> Eto'o's manifesto promised a revival of Cameroonian football, whose league structures are threadbare and a long way from their glory days of the 1970s and '80s

Elected...Eto'o arrives to vote

Record breaker... Eto'o is Cameroon's all-time top scorer

Eto'o almost did not make it to the starting line for the election, where there were numerous candidates at the beginning but just two standing when it came time to vote.

As the credibility of Eto'o's challenge became more apparent, suddenly federation officials declared he would be prohibited from running because there was a rule that only Cameroon nationals could stand. Eto'o has dual nationality, as he took out Spanish citizenship when he was playing at Barcelona. But that rather feeble effort to disqualify him was quickly challenged and discarded.

Eto'o is not the first African Footballer of the Year winner to be elected president of his country's football association. Kalusha Bwalya, who won the award in 1988, proved a competent leader of the Football Association of Zambia and it was on his watch they won the 2012 Cup of Nations. But Bwalya blotted his copybook in 2018 when he was banned from football for two years – later reduced on appeal – for "violating FIFA's Code of Ethics".

Mark Gleeson

Elkeson

The naturalised forward's departure from China hints at a wider malaise

With the current financial problems in the Chinese Super League, it wasn't much of a surprise that December saw Elkeson joining the exodus of Fabio Cannavaro, Paulinho, Talisca and others in leaving Guangzhou FC. Unlike others though, the 32-year-old's connection with China is set to endure: in nine years he has not just scored over 100 goals for Guangzhou and Shanghai Port, collecting many medals along the way, but he also picked up a Chinese passport.

In 2019, the player now known as "Ai Kesen" became the first without any Chinese heritage to be naturalised and to represent the national team. China had long struggled to produce top-class strikers – it can be debated as to whether this is a result or cause of clubs signing foreign forwards for years and years – and having a player who had been called up by Brazil in 2011 (albeit without playing) was seen as a game changer in terms of World Cup qualification. It wasn't really; four goals in 13 appearances is not bad, but they came against Guam and the Maldives, the kind of opposition that homegrown attackers would be confident of scoring against.

China superstar ...Elkeson in action during the 2022 World Cup qualifiers

> "I am Chinese and this is the country in my heart. As long as the national team needs me, I will go there without hesitation"
>
> **Elkeson**

Regardless, with four qualifiers remaining, as well as the 2023 Asian Cup taking place in China, Elkeson wants to continue playing for Team Dragon. "I am Chinese and this is the country in my heart," he said. "As long as the national team needs me, I will go there without hesitation."

Guangzhou have also seen another naturalised player, forward Alan Carvalho, depart. Striker Aloisio, also known as "Luo Goufu" may, according to reports, also head back to South America.

It remains to be seen if Elkeson and the others do get called up again. Li Tie, the former Everton and Sheffield United player, was reluctant to select the naturalised players in the first half of the final round of qualification for the 2022 World Cup. None started in the 3-2 loss to Saudi Arabia in October, a defeat that virtually ended China's hopes of appearing on the global stage for only a second time – 20 years after their 2002 debut.

Naturalised...Elkeson with London-born Nico Yennaris (aka "Li Ke")

They played a bigger part in the subsequent two games but results were not much better. With just five points from the opening six games of the final stage of qualification, Li Tie is now out of a job.

While Li Xiaopeng is a new coach, travel restrictions in and out of China remain strict, so it may be that the South Americans are not seen for a while. There are question marks over the whole project, which has never had more than lukewarm support from the public, especially if Chinese clubs can't afford to pay their salaries. The whole point was having easy access to Brazilian talent.

Regardless, Elkeson's legacy is secure as one of the best strikers the league has ever seen, with five Chinese titles and two Asian Champions League wins to his name. The former Botafogo man always gave his all and, while he may not end up scoring the goal that takes China to a World Cup, he will be fondly remembered by fans.

John Duerden

eyewitness

Tim Vickery reports

BRAZIL

A new trio of superclubs

And then there were three. Rio de Janeiro giants Flamengo and Palmeiras from Sao Paulo have been monopolising the major titles in Brazil and South America, fighting out the final of the Copa Libertadores at the end of November. But domestically, there is no doubt about it: Atletico Mineiro from Belo Horizonte have joined the restricted ranks of the superclubs.

In a season where fans were gradually allowed back during the course of the campaign, Atletico won the league for the first time in 50 years by a whopping 13-point margin, and then followed it up by completing the double – a feat only achieved once before – thrashing Athletico Paranaense 6-1 on aggregate to claim the highly-prized domestic cup as well. They came close in the Copa Libertadores, too, bowing out unbeaten after elimination on away goals by rivals Palmeiras in the semi-finals.

Last year, under former coach Jorge Sampaoli, Atletico came close, finishing third, just three points off the lead. That side lacked a centre-forward. With all the investments the club made, this emphatically was not a problem in the 2021 campaign.

The return home of Hulk could not have been more triumphant. He played just two games in Brazil in 2004 before making a name for himself abroad. For years he was an unloved and underestimated member of the national team. But now the Brazilian public have had a long look at Hulk and proclaimed him the superhero of the year, with green masks regularly seen dotted around the Mineirao stadium. He reinvented himself as a centre-forward with great success. Then, after Diego Costa was signed, he dropped deeper and wider and was just as effective.

And along with the new strikers came the Argentine midfielders. Playmaker Nacho Fernandez ran out of steam towards the end of the year, worn down by an exhausting calendar,

Coach...Cuca with the Champions Trophy

but his partnership with Hulk was the highlight of the season. Matias Zaracho was all action, all function, working box to box and constantly making an important contribution. Left-footed central midfielder Allan ran the show from deep, the loping Jair blossomed alongside him, and attackers such as Keno, the Chilean Eduardo Vargas and the Venezuelan Jeferson Savarino were always ready to come in and help the cause.

Coach Cuca had a squad of depth and quality. The legacy of Sampaoli was important – Atletico have retained the ability to put the opponent under instant pressure after losing possession. But Cuca's team were also adept at dropping deep and launching the counter-attack.

The club have big plans – they are building a new stadium – and it will be interesting to see if their level of investment is sustainable. But for now there can be no doubt about it: Brazilian football has a big three.

Flamengo were the only one of the trio to end the season without a major title. Second place in the league and the Libertadores, semi-finals in the domestic cup – this was seen as an immensely disappointing return for a club that has become accustomed to aiming high. There has been a central problem for two years: the inability to replace Spanish centre-back Pablo Mari, whose experience at operating in a high line was so crucial to the all-conquering side of 2019. Without him Flamengo have consistently defended badly, even when placing the defensive line close to their own goal. Failure to resolve this problem is chewing up coaches. Rogerio Ceni was sacked in July, and Renato Gaucho

Decisive...Hulk

Celebrating the double... Atletico Mineiro

did not survive defeat in the final of the Libertadores.

Third-placed Palmeiras were perhaps hardest hit by the continuous flow of the 2020 season into 2021. The sheer quantity of games ended up putting paid to their bid for the league – and it could well be that Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira's well-drilled, efficient but safety first side are better suited to cup football. They were certainly happy to be the first team in two decades to retain a Libertadores title.

Once seen as one of the most open championships in the world, it is now hard to imagine the league title going outside this group of three who have spent their way out of the pack.

Corinthians may be worth watching. Bogged down in recent years by financial problems – especially the need to pay for their stadium – they have opted to speculate in order to accumulate. They have signed some big names – Willian, Giuliano and the immaculate Renato Augusto – and ended up finishing fifth. Coach Sylvinho, though, is under constant pressure, and it will be fascinating to see how the veterans cope with next season's

Competing...Palmeiras and Flamengo make up the big three alongside Atletico Mineiro

daunting fixture list.

Ahead of Corinthians in fourth were Fortaleza. They were one of the stories of the year after hiring Juan Pablo Vojvoda. Another Argentine coach who came through the Defensa y Justicia club, the 46-year-old proved an inspired appointment after good work with Union La Calera in Chile. He had little to work with, but achieved excellence all the same.

Given the amount of travelling that a team from the North East have to do, fourth place and the cup semi-finals was a magnificent return for a modest squad who not surprisingly wilted a little in the last few weeks. They were refreshingly bold, and it was heart warming to see it pay off.

Their city rivals Ceara were happy with 11th place, in a table with a rather unfamiliar look about it. Two places behind Fortaleza were Red Bull Bragantino, now well established after their second season in the top flight. They also are a good watch, with a high line, a modern approach and an eye for talent – winger Artur was one of the breakout stars of the season. And traditional but modest clubs such as America from Belo Horizonte and Atletico Goianiense surpassed expectations finishing eighth and ninth respectively.

> Once seen as one of the most open championships in the world, it is now hard to imagine the league title going outside this group of three

A new big three, then, have broken away, and new forces are emerging. This inevitably puts pressure on some of the famous names. Santos, for example, flirted with relegation for a while – not a complete surprise in the wake of a recent financial implosion. But their latest youth products hauled them to safety.

Sao Paulo paid a price for expending so much effort early in the year ending a trophy drought by landing their local state championship. It put them at a huge physical disadvantage when the important stuff started. Coach Hernan Crespo was fired, the club's relationship with Dani Alves collapsed and, come the end of the year, the team were a shambles, anxiously looking over their shoulder. Athletico Paranaense won the Sudamericana and reached the final of the domestic cup, but were also dragged dangerously close to the relegation dogfight.

Such focus on the knockout competitions can be risky – just ask Gremio. Over the last few years the Porto Alegre club have not aimed at winning the league. Their main aim has been the Libertadores; winners in 2017, they were semi-finalists in the next two years and quarter-finalists in 2020.

This time, though, it all went wrong. Elimination in the qualifying phase of the Libertadores ended the long reign

of Renato Portaluppi, who had a year to forget. Accustomed to floating along in the league and turning on the tap when it pleased them, this time they never found momentum. Some of the side had aged together, the model of play was questioned – especially when they pushed the panic button and brought Luiz Felipe Scolari to the club where he made his name in the mid '90s. But Scolari's preferred game is a mile away from the possession-based style the club have cultivated in recent years. It did not work, he was sacked and Vagner Mancini, their fourth coach of the year, could not quite do enough to save their status.

This was a major surprise. Gremio have been a well-run club – in financial terms at least – but just four years after being crowned champions of South America they now go down to the second division – accompanied, more predictably, by Bahia, Sport and by Chapecoense, who managed just a single win all season.

Going the other way are second division champions Botafogo, plus Goias, Coritiba and Avai – a development weighing the first division even heavier in favour of the traditional South East, which supplies half the teams in the 2022 top flight. The South has five, leaving the rest of the country with just five representatives – the pair from Fortaleza in the North East, two from Goiania in the centre – and Cuiaba from the Centre-West, who battled unglamorously but successfully through their debut season in the top flight, and even have some international action to look forward to.

Manager of the year... Juan Pablo Vojvoda

All of these teams are at a major disadvantage – they have to travel much further distances to their games than the sides in the South and the South East. And with four teams per year going down – which guarantees drama but plays havoc with club finances – they can look forward to sweat, sacrifice and hours on aeroplanes in 2022.

As for the rest of the insanely overcrowded calendar (with State championships to come before the return of the national league), simply finishing in time for the Qatar World Cup will be a real challenge.

Copa Sudamericana champions...Athletico Paranaense

Despair...
Tata Martino

eyewitness

Martin del Palacio Langer reports

MEXICO

El Tri under pressure

The Mexican National team is in trouble. Gerardo "Tata" Martino's team lost their last two qualifiers, in the United States and Canada, and fell from first to third in the CONCACAF qualifying final round. Although the ticket to Qatar does not appear to be in imminent danger yet, the defeats have plunged the team into a kind of mini-crisis both on and off the field.

The first loss, 2-0 against USA, was particularly painful. Not only because the Americans are Mexico's arch-rivals, but also because it was the third consecutive defeat of the year – in the summer, they had lost 3-2 in the final of the CONCACAF Nations League and 1-0 in the final of the Gold Cup – which marks a reversal of a trend that, for the last decade, had notably favoured *El Tri*.

Furthermore, it was the first match in which Mexico had been completely outplayed by their rival. In the previous two, they had been the ones who carried the weight of the game, only to fall due to specific errors and set-pieces. But in this case, after an even first half, the Americans

completely outplayed them in the second half, and ended up with a more than deserved victory.

The result was a blow to the fans, but it seemed to be to Tata Martino as well. Four days later, in the cold of Edmonton, fearful of the dynamism of Alphonso Davies and Jonathan David, Mexico came out with an ultra-defensive approach against Canada for the first time in their history.

The first half was a sordid affair, and when it looked like it would end 0-0, an unusual mistake by the ever-reliable Guillermo Ochoa allowed Cyle Larin to open the scoring for the Canadians. From then on, *El Tri* collapsed and Larin scored a second in the 52nd minute. It was not until the final stretch that Mexico woke up and laid siege to their rivals' goal. Hector Herrera managed to reduce the arrears in the 90th minute, and Canadian goalkeeper Milan Borjan saved his side from an equaliser at the death to seal the shock 2-1 victory.

The two defeats left Mexico in third place in the group, two points below Canada, one below the United States and tied with Panama, who they remain ahead of on goal difference. CONCACAF only grants three direct tickets to Qatar 2022, with fourth place heading to the intercontinental play-offs.

Inside the bad moment, there is some positive news for *El Tri*. Tata Martino's side have the easiest schedule of all the teams. Of their last six games, four will be at home at the Azteca Stadium, where Mexico have only lost two qualifying games in their history. Their two away games will be in Honduras, who are in last place in the table, and Jamaica, who have barely won a match in the competition.

Even if the situation were to become truly catastrophic and Mexico finished in fourth place, luck would have it that in the play-offs, the representative of CONCACAF will face the representative of Oceania, most likely New Zealand, who *El Tri* beat 9-2 on aggregate ahead of Brazil 2014.

Despite all this, it is difficult to feel optimistic about the future of the team. The matches against the United States and Canada revealed a slow and sluggish side, lacking in confidence and with few alternatives from the bench. In a revealing statistic, in the match played against the Stars and Stripes, the average age of the Aztec team was 28.9 years, while that of their opponents was 23.6.

Several of the leaders of *El Tri* do not seem to be at their best. Keeper Guillermo Ochoa, fundamental in the team's performances in Brazil 2014 and Russia 2018, made the error that cost the defeat against Canada; Wolves' Raul Jimenez was unable to generate a clear-cut chance in either of the two matches; Napoli's Hirving Lozano didn't come out for the second half of the match in Canada, while Hector Herrera and Jesus Corona paid for their lack of activity at Atletico Madrid and Porto respectively with disappointing performances.

Only Edson Alvarez, who has had

Tough night...Jesus Corona reacts during the defeat to the USA

Next generation... Mexico won bronze at the Olympics

an extraordinary season at Ajax, was remotely close to his usual level, and even so he was not able to prevail against the speed and more physical style of the American and Canadian midfielders.

Despite this, the Mexico manager does not seem willing to try a changing of the guard, even if he has a talented generation of youngsters at his disposal who won the bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics in August.

In addition, it must also be taken into account that Mexico will play their next two home games behind closed doors due to a FIFA ban, as a result of one of the most controversial issues in the country in recent years: the "*p**o*" cry.

Despite being used with other meanings on some occasions, the word is in general an insulting and derogatory term to refer to homosexuals. Since a pre-Olympic tournament in 2003, fans of the Mexican team have shouted the slur in the stands to pressure the away goalkeeper every time he goes to take a goal-kick.

Since then, it has become a bizarre tradition, repeated in the 2006, 2010 and 2014 World Cups. It was precisely from the tournament in Brazil, and the transmission of the cry worldwide, that FIFA decided to take action to eradicate it, and warned the Mexican Football Federation (FMF) that they should stop their fans from doing so.

The federation did not take the warning seriously and, in 2015, FIFA issued a fine for the repetition of the cry. The federation then appealed to CAS, arguing that the scream was a harmless Mexican custom, and that the word had more meanings than the homophobic insult. The appeal did not proceed, and in the face of the repeated shout, FIFA continued to fine the FMF, essentially after each match of the national team.

Among the press and fans, in principle, the ban by FIFA caused outrage. Little by little, however, the perception has been changing and there are now more and more voices, among journalists and fans, who are condemning the cry and asking for its eradication. The FMF, frightened by the possibility of playing without fans or even having points deducted in the qualifiers, changed their stance, and began campaigns to eradicate the scream, although so far it has always felt half-hearted, as if they believed they were being unjustly threatened.

> Mexico will play their next two home games behind closed doors due to a FIFA ban, as a result of one of the most controversial issues in the country in recent years: the "*p**o*" cry

The threats and fines, however, changed the nature of the cry. From then on, the fans, instead of doing it to pressure the rival goalkeeper, began to yell to pressure their own team, when they were not satisfied with their performance in the match.

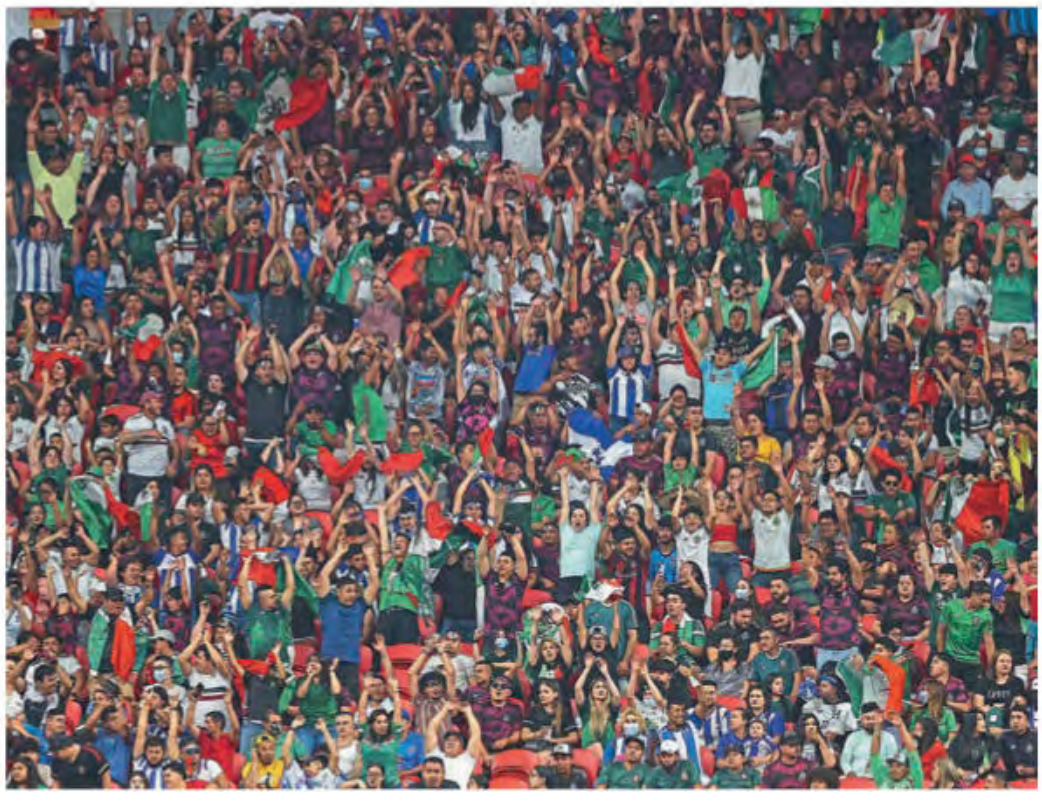
As Mexico have not played well in the qualifying phase heading to Qatar 2022, the cry has been repeated in each match of the national team. FIFA finally followed through on their threats, suspending spectators for two matches (reduced to one on appeal), in June, and again in November.

Therefore, the next international window looks more complicated than it would seem for Mexico. First with a trip to Kingston, against a Jamaican side that already made life difficult for them at the Azteca Stadium before losing 2-1 in the last minute, and then without their fans in the two crucial games against Costa Rica and Panama in Mexico City.

Anything less than six points out of a possible nine would seriously complicate the ticket to Qatar for *El Tri* and seriously jeopardise the continuity of Tata Martino at the helm of the team.

He maintains the full support of the federation, although he seems to have lost almost all the fans.

And to be under pressure in Mexico means that he's in the hot seat for real, and the threat of being fired must be taken seriously. After all, he manages a trigger-happy country that has had nine different coaches since the last time one of them, Ricardo La Volpe, completed a full World Cup cycle, between 2002 and 2006.



Problematic... Mexico's supporters have landed their team in trouble

The BIG stories of 2022

...before they happen

Nick Bidwell takes a look ahead to the stories that will dominate the headlines in the New Year...

1 COULD A BIENNIAL WORLD CUP HAPPEN?

On the face of it, there is far too much resolute opposition for the concept to become a reality. After all, the proposal to switch from a four to a two-year cycle has already been met with widespread resistance from domestic leagues, confederations, players, clubs and supporter groups. That said, FIFA president Gianni Infantino is clearly very keen on a revolutionary new calendar and may calculate that he can drum up enough supporting voices in Africa, Asia, Central America and Oceania. Some sort of last-gasp fudge may yet be on the cards.

New proposals... Gianni Infantino

2 ARE JUVENTUS DESTINED TO FALL FURTHER STILL IN THE ITALIAN PECKING ORDER?

The problem for Juventus is that they are assailed by ill winds from all quarters. Not only have the *Bianconeri* been on a sharp downward curve in Serie A for the last 18 months, going from an all-conquering force to inconsistent also-rans, the Turin club is also beset with other woes. They recorded losses of €210 million for the 2020-21 financial year, and are currently under investigation (among others) by the Italian financial police for inflating transfer fees. Coach Massimiliano Allegri, back for a second stint at the helm, needs a reset – and fast.

Xavi...Barca's saviour?

3 WILL NEW COACH XAVI PROVE BARCELONA'S SAVIOUR?

As a legendary former Barca skipper and midfield creator, someone seeped in the DNA of the success-laden Guardiola era, Xavi was an obvious choice to take over the technical reins from the out-of-depth Ronald Koeman. Xavi, in charge of Al Sadd in Qatar for the last two years, has the sharpest of tactical minds and certainly did well during his time in the Gulf. Much will depend on how well he maximises the talents of the young guns in the *Blaugrana* ranks: Pedri, Gavi, Ansu Fati, Nico Gonzalez, Oscar Mingueza and Ronald Araujo.

Over-burdened...will players cope with the schedule?

4 A WINTER WORLD CUP: A STUDY IN OVERLOAD

For the first time in over nine decades, a World Cup will be held in November/December, inevitably bringing with it substantial disruption to major domestic competitions. The Premier League, for example, will be shut down from November 13 to Boxing Day (December 26) and this window seems excessively tight, with stars who go far at Qatar 2022 then forced to resume on the domestic front within days. The danger of player burnout is a very real one and, more than ever, heavy squad rotation will have to come into play.

Struggling... Juve playmaker Paulo Dybala

Protests...Germany players before their World Cup qualifier v Iceland

5 CAN THE QATAR WORLD CUP RISE ABOVE THE NEGATIVITY?

Allegations of malpractice in the host nation voting process; the high numbers of migrant workers who have died on stadia construction sites; a myriad of human rights issues; the lack of a genuine football culture – never before has a World Cup organiser been as swathed in bad publicity as Qatar. But, as unpalatable as it is to many, a World Cup very much remains a World Cup, the most-watched sports event on the planet. Once the ball starts to roll, billions will be following every kick.

Interim...Ralf Rangnick

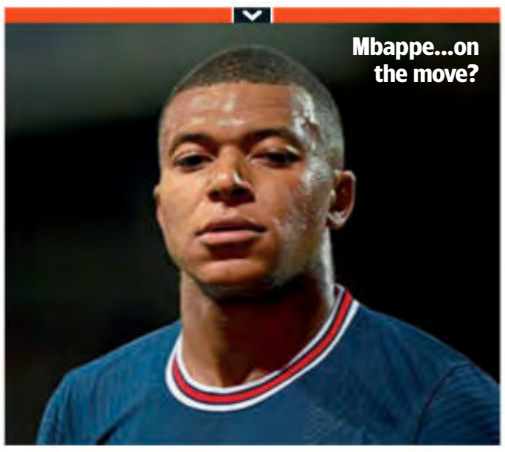
6 WILL THERE BE AN AFCON HANGOVER?

This year's Africa Cup of Nations concludes at the start of February, but the ramifications may be seen well beyond that. The timing of the competition has provoked no end of gnashing of teeth at European clubs, more than a little miffed by the enforced absence of several leading men.

The tournament, which has already been postponed twice, will hit the Premier League clubs especially hard, with up to 40 players on assignment in Cameroon. Dealing without star players' absences will be hard enough for managers; keeping them fit until the end of a long season will be even tougher. How they deal with the fallout from AFCON 2021 may well be decisive at both ends of the table.

7 THE RALF RANGNICK EFFECT

With Premier League movers and shakers usually so well informed about coaching talent in Europe, it's something of a mystery why Rangnick was not snapped up by a top English club before now. Constantly innovative, tactically ahead of his time and a wonderful communicator, the former Stuttgart, Schalke, Hoffenheim and RB Leipzig supremo has been one of Europe's top football thinkers and practitioners for many years and should make all the difference to a dysfunctional Manchester United. Under Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, there was no strategic plan; expect the opposite with Rangnick.


Mbappe...on the move?

8 IF KYLIAN MBAPPE JOINS REAL MADRID, WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE PSG?

With his contract set to expire in the summer and, having already been the subject of a bid from Real Madrid last year, a move to the Bernabeu seems inevitable for Mbappe. For his Paris Saint-Germain swansong, he would no doubt like to go out in style, notably starring in a Champions League triumph. However, that may be too much to ask. The brilliant 23-year-old attacker is plainly not happy at the Parc des Princes and that is unlikely to change between now and the end of the season. Who might replace him at PSG? Red Bull Salzburg's Karim Adeyemi or Dusan Vlahovic of Fiorentina may fit the bill.

Drained... Mo Salah

9 AFTER FLOPPING IN RUSSIA, WILL GERMANY BE BACK TO THEIR BEST IN QATAR?

Hopes are justifiably high in Germany that the *Nationalmannschaft* have rediscovered their mojo. With seven wins out of seven, results have been excellent since former Bayern Munich manager Hansi Flick succeeded Joachim Low last autumn, and what's been most impressive is how quickly Flick has reinvigorated the spirit and hunger in the camp. Flick describes his team as being in "winning mode", and that says it all for a side that has gone from morose to enthusiastically ambitious in next to no time.

Strong start ...Hansi Flick

Pitch invasion... Dimitri Payet at Nice

10 CAN FRENCH AUTHORITIES PUT A LID ON THE WAVE OF FAN VIOLENCE?

This season in Ligue 1, supporters misbehaving has been the trend of the autumn. Two of Marseille's encounters (at Nice and Lyon) had to be abandoned after Marseille playmaker Dimitri Payet was felled by bottles thrown from the stand, the Northern Derby between Lens and Lille and the Saint-Etienne v Angers match-up were both halted by fan trouble, while Paris Saint-Germain star Neymar was met with a hail of bottles when taking corners at the State Velodrome in October. So far, sanctions – deducted points and games behind closed doors – have simply not worked.

11 WHERE NEXT FOR ZIZOU?

Despite being heavily linked with the managerial vacancy at Manchester United, former Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane is much more likely to respond to the siren call of his homeland, with Paris Saint-Germain apparently keen to bring him on board for next season. The word on the street in Paris is that the PSG high command are on the verge of giving up on coach Mauricio Pochettino, of the opinion that Poch's style of play is too sterile and pedestrian for an elite team.

Zinedine Zidane ...French return?

Kalidou Koulibaly... the Napoli defender was the victim of racist chanting

12 IS ITALIAN FOOTBALL FINALLY WAKING UP TO THE ISSUE OF RACISM?

After countless episodes of supporters abusing players on the grounds of ethnicity and many years of lip service to the problem, the Italian league at last appears to have received the "no tolerance" memo.

At a meeting of Serie A clubs in October, an edict was passed giving clubs the right to ban anyone found guilty of racist remarks or gestures. The dam just had to burst at some point. Better late than never.

13 BLATTER AND PLATINI IN THE DOCK

Once the most powerful duo in world football, former FIFA supremo Sepp Blatter and ex-UEFA president Michel Platini are due to go to trial in a Swiss court in 2022, charged with fraud and other offences. This follows a six-year investigation into a £1.6 million payment from FIFA to Platini. For both men, who strenuously deny wrongdoing, the stakes could not be higher. If found guilty, the pair face sentences of up to five years in prison.

In form...Haller scores against Sporting

14 CAN SEBASTIEN HALLER KEEP SCORING IN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE?

The Franco-Ivorian striker was simply irresistible in Europe this autumn, scoring no fewer than ten goals in Ajax's six Group C matches, including an unforgettable quadruple blitz in a 5-1 hammering of Sporting of Lisbon in September. Incredible to think that not so long ago, Haller was labelled a £45m flop at West Ham United. If he continues in this rich vein, Ajax could conceivably go much further in the competition. "I've never felt as strong as I do now," he says.

On fire...Vinicius Jr. has impressed for Real Madrid

In the dock... Michel Platini

Time to deliver... Gareth Southgate

15 NO MORE YEARS OF HURT FOR ENGLAND?

If the history of international football tells us anything at all, it's that momentum counts for a great deal. In England's last two tournaments – the 2018 World Cup and Euro 2020 – Gareth Southgate's Three Lions side have reached the last-four and final respectively, and that sort of consistency at the highest level should stand them in good stead in Qatar. The group are young, hungry, ultra-talented, awash with squad depth and most important of all, have no complexes. They know what it takes to travel deep into a tournament and only have that one vital last step to make.

South American champions...Palmeiras won the Copa Libertadores in 2021

16 "AUNT LEILA" TAKES OVER AT SOUTH AMERICA'S TOP CLUB

Gender stereotypes took another battering in Brazil recently when Sao Paulo outfit Palmeiras elected their first female president: billionaire businesswoman Leila Pereira. The 57-year-old is only the second woman ever to hold such a post in the macho world of Brazilian football; Patricia Amorim ran Flamengo between 2009 and 2012. Pereira certainly has a big job on her hands at Palmeiras, who have won the last two Copa Libertadores titles.

17 CAN VINICIUS JR. TRANSLATE HIS RED-HOT CLUB FORM TO THE NATIONAL TEAM?

While the young, skilful Brazilian attacker has been firing on all cylinders for Real Madrid – racking up goal upon goal in La Liga and the Champions League – the 21-year-old wing wizard remains something of an enigma for Brazil. In his nine senior appearances thus far for the *Selecao*, he has started only twice and is yet to score. Brazil boss Tite appears to have reservations about him, placing him behind Ajax's Antony and Raphinha of Leeds United in the pecking order. Perhaps in 2022 that will change.

Super agent... Jorge Mendes

18 AGENTS, BEWARE

The game's coterie of impresarios may be in for a harder time now that FIFA has them in their crosshairs. Aiming to bring greater transparency to the transfer market, the game's global governing body is looking to institute a tougher agent licensing regime and cap the fees agents receive in player transactions to ten per cent. The influential Committee on Culture and Education at the European Parliament has backed the plans, which also feature the introduction of a Clearing House to ensure proper training and solidarity payments.

FULL STRETCH

Chelsea and Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy has had to take the long route to the top…

Words: Nick Bidwell

Chelsea's towering last-line-of-defence Edouard Mendy is not merely an outstanding keeper, one of the best in the world today. The 29-year-old Senegal international is a living, breathing symbol of what can be achieved against the odds.

Prior to becoming a Champions League winner with Chelsea last term, Mendy has had absolutely nothing handed to him on a silver platter. He has had to strive and scrap to make headway in the game, frequently on the wrong end of bad breaks and forced to surmount the sort of obstacles which the vast majority of golden boys never have to encounter: adolescent rejection, dubious advice, long spells of flat-lining anonymity in the lower leagues and even a spell of unemployment as recently as six years ago.

Now 29, he is the classic late-developer. He was 24 when he signed his first professional contract at Reims in 2016 and was still playing in the French second tier just three-and-a-half years ago (also with Reims). No wonder his current state of grace in west London tastes so sweet to him. "I know I've come from a long way back," declared Mendy in an interview with *Le Parisien* last year.

The son of a Senegalese mother and a father from Guinea-Bissau, young Edouard – born in the western French town of Montivilliers, a few kilometres north of the Norman port city of Le Havre – was forced to confront disappointment at an early stage in his soccer life.

At the age of 14, he had been as proud as punch when inducted into the academy of Normandy's most prestigious club, Le Havre, and with good reason. Not only do Le Havre have a great reputation for nurturing fine goalkeepers – most notably Steve Mandanda, the Marseille keeper with 34 France caps – the entire youth set-up is regarded as one of the best in the country. Their long list of alumni includes French internationals Lassana Diarra, Jean-Alain Boumsong, Pascal Chimbonda and, for a couple of years as a teenager, Paul Pogba.

Mendy would have dreamt about following in their footsteps. Unfortunately, though, it never came to pass. Within a year, his coaches had pushed him down the pecking order and, unhappy at his lack of match practice, he agreed to move on to

the club's satellite outfit CS Municipaux. He would remain there for the next five years (2006-11), first in the Under-19s, then as a first-teamer for two seasons.

Naturally, the Le Havre brush-off left Mendy devastated. "It was my first slap in the face and it hurt," admitted Edouard in an interview with *France Football* magazine in April 2021. "I'd been at the academy for just a year. It was my hometown club, where I really wanted to succeed. When you arrive at a pro academy, you anticipate breaking into the Under-18s, the reserves, the first team. For me, it was already over at the U16 stage and now I'd have to return to district football.

"The day Le Havre let me go, I went home to see my mum and dad and they were sick for me. There's no worse feeling than making your parents sad. I told myself that I would put a smile back on their faces by making it in the game. Even if it wasn't here, I'd succeed somewhere else. That was for sure."

A steely character, then – and he'd need it. Three seasons with Cherbourg, the team he joined after leaving CS Municipaux, was one such instance of the rug being pulled out from under him. He had, on the face of it, made good progress there, rising from third to first choice in the pecking order and performing well in the 2013-14 fourth division, albeit in a poor side that went down at the end of the season.

Sadly for him and Cherbourg, the relegation turned out to be a double-demotion, with a €120,000 hole in

Chelsea star...Mendy celebrating another Premier League clean sheet

their accounts plunging the club into the sixth division. Understandably, Mendy opted to quit the sinking ship, his resolve to start anew stiffened by an agent's promise of work in the English leagues. "He advised me not to reply to any offers I might receive from third or fourth division clubs in France," Mendy told *Radio Monte Carlo Sport*. "I replied: 'OK, as long as you take me over there [to England]'." A worrying radio silence ensued. Calls and messages to the agent were not returned and only on the last day of the summer 2014 transfer window did he finally hear some news. "He [the agent] sent me a text to say that the market in England was blocked and that he could do nothing for me. I was bowled over. I hadn't foreseen that."

Now left high and dry without a club, Mendy had no other solution but to swallow his pride and sign on at the local unemployment office in Le Havre. To make matters worse, he and his partner were expecting a child. "It was my mother who advised me to go to the Job Centre," explained Mendy in an interview last year on the long-running French football TV show *Telefoot*. "I had no idea how it all worked. Sometimes I look back at those times. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. I told myself dozens of times that football was over for me.

"I felt like giving it all up. I didn't feel useful. I was sad, angry. I was raging."

Nevertheless, a voice deep urged persistence. During those long nine months of unemployment, Mendy, then aged 22, crucially kept himself in shape, allowed to train with the reserves at Le Havre. All credit to Le Havre goalkeeping coach Michel Courel for keeping him in the loop. "These were very complicated times," Mendy explained to *Radio Monte Carlo*. "I was buffeted between the need to earn money to feed my family and the fact that I wanted to stay in football. I had the will to hang on in there. I wanted my son to be proud of me, to say to himself that his father hadn't given up."

Role model...former Le Havre goalkeeper Steve Mandanda

> "The day Le Havre let me go, I went home to see my mum and dad and they were sick for me. There's no worse feeling than making your parents sad. I told myself that I would put a smile back on their faces by making it in the game"

Who would have guessed back then that such a Lost Boy would soon become such a football A-lister?

With the benefit of hindsight, it's tempting to say that Mendy was simply out of luck in those difficult formative years. He had more than sufficient physical, technical and mental assets, yet was somehow sideswiped by fate.

Many who crossed his path as a youngster liked what they saw. Abasse Ba, one of his coaches at CS Municipaux, says he stood out because of his dedication and determination to follow his dream, while Michel Courel at Le Havre remembers a highly-motivated individual, whose strengths were his work ethic, dexterity and imposing physical presence.

Maximes Fouques, a team-mate at Cherbourg, insists that Mendy's late-blooming prowess has not surprised him at all: "He's a genuine person, someone who gives his all and is professional. He deserves all his success. He hasn't changed, either on the pitch or off it. That's his strength. Wherever he plays, he wins people over. He knows where he came from."

As previously mentioned, doubts about his future in the game did cross his mind. Indeed, in the summer of 2015, he was seriously mulling over an offer from a friend to manage a shop, until a fateful phone call from an old team-mate.

Timeline

MAR 23, 2012
Plays his first senior game, coming off the subs' bench for Cherbourg during a 1-0 win.

MAY 3, 2014
Starts in Cherbourg's 1-0 defeat to Stade Bordelais, his final appearance for the club before their relegation and his release.

JAN 23, 2016
After more than 18 months without a game, Mendy starts a French fourth-tier game for Marseille's reserves.

AUG 1, 2016
Makes his Ligue 2 debut for Reims, coming off the bench after first-choice goalkeeper Johann Carrasso is sent off after just five minutes.

NOV 17, 2017
Declares his international allegiance for Senegal, having turned down a call-up by Guinea-Bissau for AFCON 2017.

APR 20, 2018
Registers his 18th clean sheet of the season as Reims win the 2017-18 Ligue 2 title.

Ligue 1 breakthrough...Mendy in action for Reims

Defender Ted Lavie, one of his old Cherbourg colleagues, was a close friend of Olympique Marseille goalkeeping coach Dominique Bernatowicz. *Les Olympiens*, it turned out, had a vacancy for a third-choice goalkeeper, and Lavie had thrown Mendy's hat into the ring. Following a successful week-long trial, Mendy, to his huge relief, was accepted. His exile was over.

It wasn't quite his top-level breakthrough, but it was a start. Despite only appearing eight times for the Marseille B team in that 2015-16 season, and never coming close to the first team, Mendy enjoyed every minute of that campaign in the south of France. Overjoyed just to be back in the football brotherhood, he put his time there to good use, working diligently on his skill-set, and carefully studying Mandanda, his former role model at Le Havre and by now Marseille's No.1. With experienced back-up goalie Yohann Pele also offering words of wisdom, the Stade Velodrome proved the perfect learning environment for Mendy.

OM were prepared to extend his deal with them, but preferring a more durable personal project, "Edou" had his eyes fixed on other horizons. Eventually he agreed to join second division Reims as their second-choice goalkeeper. At the relatively advanced age of 23, he at last had a proper pro contract in his pocket.

Tough test... PSG's Edinson Cavani attempts to score past Mendy

Serving as the understudy to Johann Carrasso, he was quickly thrown into the deep end, coming off the bench on the first game of the 2016-17 season after the first-choice shot-stopper was sent off.

Within a year, Mendy had moved up the pecking order, beginning the 2017-18 between the posts and staying there, playing a starring role as the Champagne club walked away with the Ligue 2 title.

There would be no stopping him now. Improving month on month, his first season in the French top flight (2018-19) turned out to be the stuff of dreams, with Reims achieving a superb eighth-place finish and Edouard voted the best keeper in the league.

> "I told myself dozens of times that football was over for me. I felt like giving it all up. I didn't feel useful"

That same season, he became a full international, winning his first Senegal cap in November 2018, a 1-0 win over Equatorial Guinea in an Africa Cup of Nations qualifier. Because of parentage, he also had the chance to play for Guinea-Bissau and appeared for the

AUG 11, 2018
Plays his first Ligue 1 game in a 1-0 win over Nice, going on to play all 38 league games in the 2018-19 season, and keeping 14 clean sheets.

NOV 18, 2018
Makes his Senegal debut in a 1-0 win over Equatorial Guinea.

JUN 23, 2019
Begins AFCON 2019 as Senegal's first-choice keeper, starting in the opening 2-0 win over Tanzania.

JUL 1, 2019
Breaks a finger ahead of Senegal's AFCON group-stage game against Kenya, forcing him to miss the rest of the team's run to the final.

In demand...Mendy is presented at Rennes' Roazhon Park in 2019

upwardly mobile Breton outfit Rennes, the freshly-crowned French Cup winners. The cost of the operation? A ridiculously low €4 million.

With the Red-and-Blacks, he would continue to look the part, performing with distinction as the club finished the truncated 2019-20 season in third, a spot good enough for a Champions League berth.

Mendy had not expected to be a "here today, gone tomorrow" feature at Rennes. But when Chelsea, desperate for a new goalie after Kepa Arrizabalaga's repeated gaffes, came calling for him in September 2020, he never was going to refuse, especially with Chelsea performance and technical advisor Petr Cech leading the charm offensive. A wonderful keeper during latter in friendlies in the autumn of 2016. Edouard insists, however, that the choice was, basically, an easy one. "I did rush matters a little," he admitted to Reims daily *L'Union*. "I was going through a complicated period personally. My father, who's of Guinean origin, was seriously ill and I wanted to please him. It wasn't really my choice. I've always wanted to represent Senegal, where my mother comes from."

By the summer of 2019, Mendy found himself at a crossroads in his career. Thanks to his brilliance for Reims, his star was now firmly in the ascendancy and it was inevitable that he would move on, snapped up by

AFCON 2019...Mendy makes a save during Senegal's group-stage defeat to Algeria

AUG 25, 2019
Makes his debut for new club Rennes against Strasbourg, saving a penalty in a 2-0 win to earn the first of nine clean sheets in 2019-20.

SEP 19, 2019
Gets his first taste of European football, starting in Rennes' 1-1 Europa League draw with Celtic.

APR 20, 2020
The 2019-20 Ligue 1 season is brought to a premature end with Rennes in third, earning them Champions League qualification.

SEP 29, 2020
Makes his Chelsea debut five days after arriving, starting in an EFL Cup fourth round defeat to Tottenham Hotspur.

OCT 3, 2020
Keeps a clean sheet on his league debut, a 4-0 win v Crystal Palace, becoming the first African goalkeeper to play in the Premier League since 2012.

Winner...Mendy lifts the Champions League trophy

his playing career, as well as an ex-Rennes star, Cech had been following the Senegalese custodian for years and was uniquely equipped to seal the deal.

For Christophe Lollichon, the former Chelsea goalkeeping coach who was also heavily involved in bringing Mendy to Stamford Bridge, the Senegalese man's talent could be spotted from outer space. "If recruiters can't notice someone who is almost two metres tall, is good on the ball and in his positioning, and is great at taking the initiative, then they should try another job," Lollichon told the Marseille newspaper, *Le Phoceen* in 2019. "He's a proactive keeper and very influential."

It's fair to say that Chelsea had their fingers burned when spending £71.6m on Kepa. But they have more than made up for that error by signing Mendy. At £21.6m, the Senegalese star is, by comparison, the bargain of the century.

> Chelsea had their fingers burned spending £71.6m on Kepa...at £21.6m, Mendy is the bargain of the century

Having spent so much of his career as back-up, Mendy wasted very little time in securing the No.1 spot at Stamford Bridge. He played 44 games in 2020-21, recording 24 clean sheets, including nine in the Champions League, a record he shares with Santiago Canizares of Valencia (2000-01) and Keylor Navas (Real Madrid, 2015-16). The first African goalkeeper to win the European Cup in almost 40 years, he is a pioneer for the ages.

OCT 20, 2020
Starts his first-ever Champions League game, a 0-0 group-stage draw with Sevilla.

NOV 24, 2020
Returns to his former club Rennes in the Champions League group stage, taking part in a 2-1 win for his new club.

MAY 8, 2021
Saves a penalty from Sergio Aguero as Chelsea come from behind to beat Manchester City 2-1 in a dress rehearsal for the Champions League final.

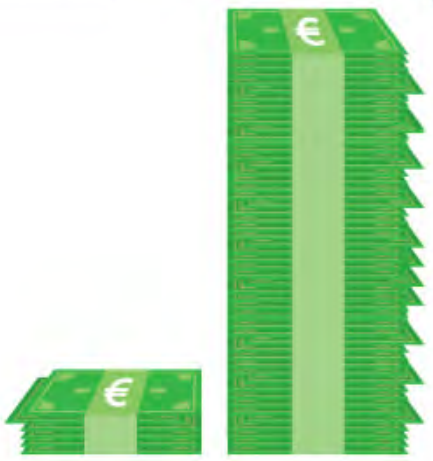
MAY 29, 2021
Becomes the first African goalkeeper to start a Champions League final since 1985, and collects a joint-record ninth clean sheet in the final.

AUG 11, 2021
Starts in Chelsea's UEFA Super Cup clash with Villarreal, before being substituted for the victorious penalty shootout after a 1-1 draw.

Edouard Mendy

the numbers game

TRANSFER FEES

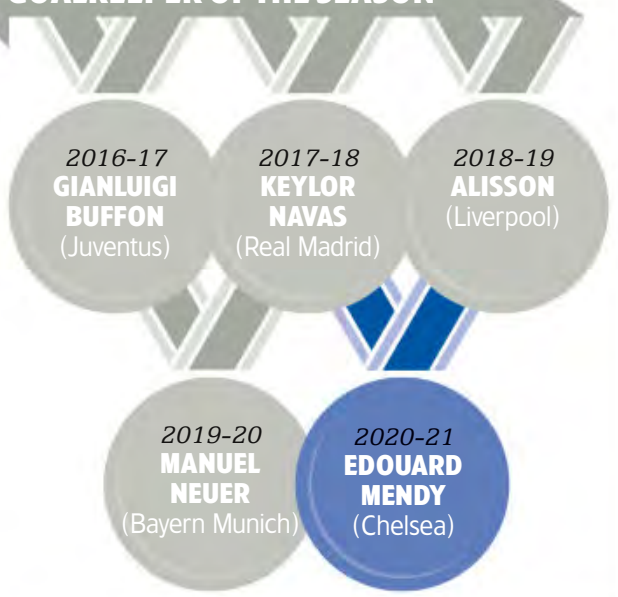


Free — Marseille to Reims (2016)

€4m — Reims to Rennes (2019)

€25m — Rennes to Chelsea (2020)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GOALKEEPER OF THE SEASON



SENEGAL

15 CAPS

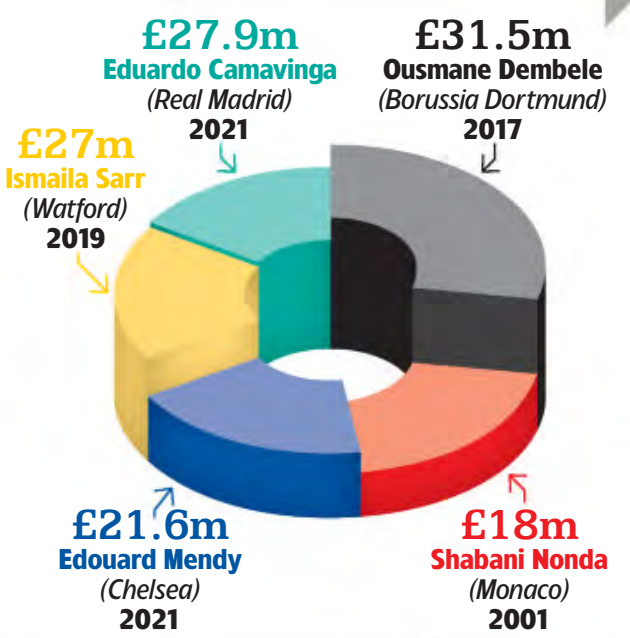
9 CLEAN SHEETS

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE CLEAN SHEETS

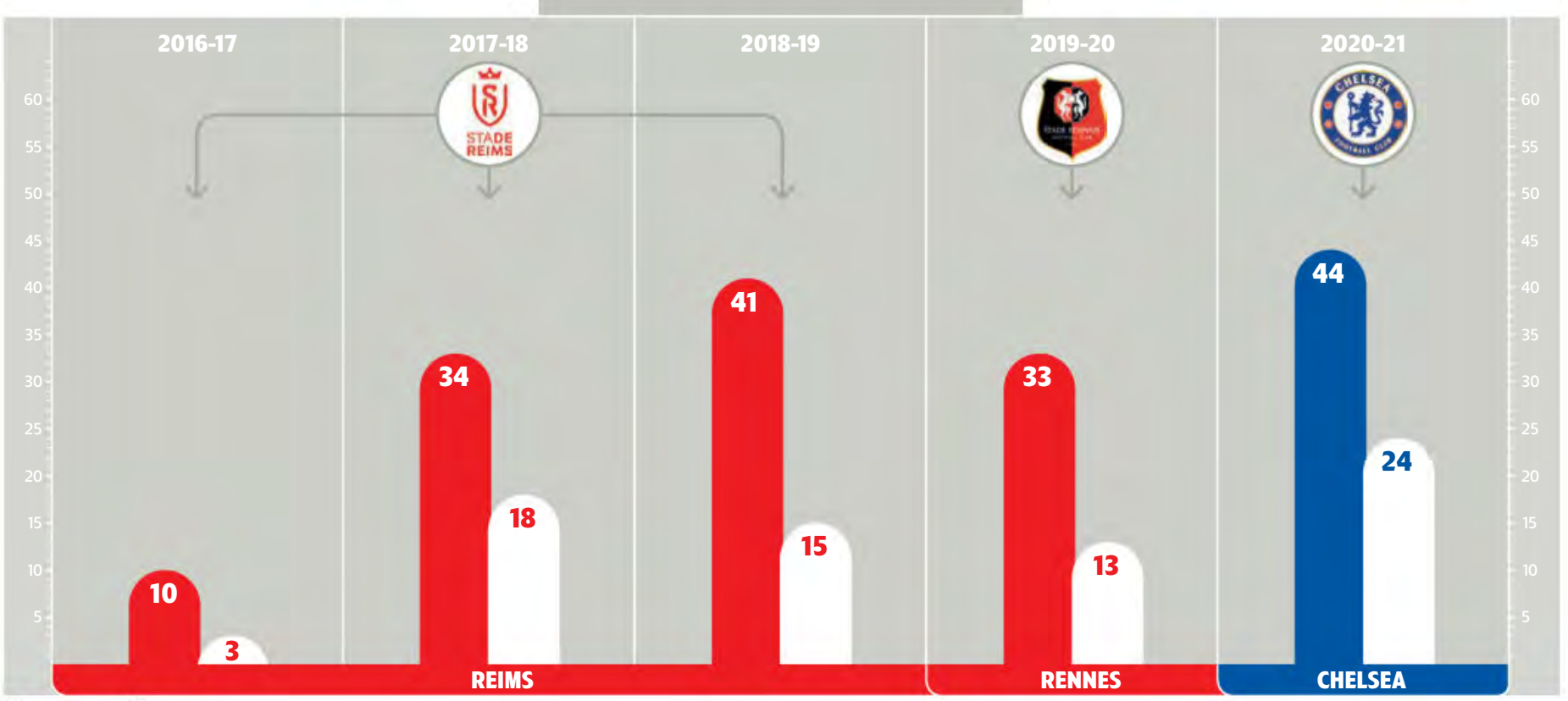
Since the start of 2020-21

Player (club)	Games	Clean Sheets
Edouard Mendy *(Chelsea)*	17	13
Thibaut Courtois *(Real Madrid)*	18	8
Alisson *(Liverpool)*	13	7
Manuel Neuer *(Bayern Munich)*	14	7
Ederson *(Manchester City)*	17	7

RENNES' BIGGEST SALES



HONOURS



GAMES CLEAN SHEETS

(International caps, goals and pie chart correct up to 31.12.21)

A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

Marcus Thuram, son of former France defender Lilian, sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his famous father, nearly joining Internazionale, and bouncing back from injury…

Words: Ryan Baldi

At the beginning of the season, Marcus Thuram was riding a tsunami of momentum. He'd just participated in the summer's European Championship, his place in France's star-studded squad earned by two years of fine form and continuous development with German giants Borussia Monchengladbach. At 24, he was one of the most sought-after young forwards in Europe and Internazionale's primary transfer target.

Then it came to a screeching halt.

"I didn't realise at first," Thuram says of the knee injury he suffered in the first half of an eventual 4-0 defeat to Bayer Leverkusen in August. "When you're in the course of the game, you always think positive and think you can restart the game. I asked the doctor if I could try ten or 15 minutes. After three or four minutes, I felt like it was too dangerous to continue, so I asked for the sub.

"Later that night, I felt the pain increasing, because my adrenaline was down, and the next morning they told me it was quite serious."

Damage to the medial collateral ligament was the diagnosis. He'd be out for up to 12 weeks, he was told. It would have been easy to find only disappointment in scuppered plans, but Thuram saw an opportunity to take stock of how far he'd come, pinpoint a path to further improvement and work on his wellbeing.

"It's true that coming back from the European Championship with France, I came with a lot of expectation for myself," he explains. "I was really looking forward to this season. This injury, I saw it as a minor setback [and a chance to] concentrate, think about what I want and what I don't want, to reflect on the two seasons I had and on how I could get better.

"When you're out that long, you have more time to think about your game and think about your personal life. When you have games and training every day, it's a routine. You're out there performing and you think about nothing else.

"The more I grow, the more I understand that your mental state is really important – the way you are, the way you behave, the way you think. The older I get, the more I understand that maybe half of the performance you have at the weekend is based on the mental performance that you have in everyday life. That's a conversation that I have often with my dad."

Such parental advice carries extra weight in Thuram's case. His father, of course, is Lilian Thuram. In a 17-year playing career, Thuram Senior became the most capped player in the history of the French national team, won medals in three countries and starred in a World Cup triumph on home soil in 1998.

Although a France international himself, Marcus Thuram was born in Italy in 1997, owing to the fact his father was playing for Parma at the time, at

Postbank
H-Hotels

Penalty shootout... Thuram scores from the spot against Switzerland at Euro 2020

the height of the Serie A boom (his younger brother, Khephren, who plays for Nice, was also born in Italy). For much of Thuram's young life, though, he had little understanding of his dad's status as one of the greatest-ever defenders.

"In Italy, I don't think I realised who my dad was," he says. "I think I realised who he was when we came to Barcelona. I was ten, and I saw Ronaldinho. I understood then that my dad was training with Ronaldinho. That's when I got who my dad was."

As Thuram began to make his early steps in football, then, he did so in the knowledge that his father had spent an illustrious career rubbing shoulders as a peer with the game's greats. He came to realise that the name across his back drew attention. "It's something that I knew, but I'm not somebody who cares about the outside noise," he says. "I knew that I had a name and I knew that people saw the name as an expectation to perform in another way. I didn't really care about this.

"My dad is a role model to me. He helps me a lot in everyday life, not only in football."

So often in sport, the added pressure of a famous name comes with a pay-off: unwarranted opportunities. Many a sporting offspring has progressed further in their parent's field than could be expected of an average Joe of equal talent. Thuram insists he is no beneficiary of nepotism. The hype that came to surround him was a slow build. As a youngster he was rarely considered as bright a prospect as some team-mates, hence his modest start with Sochaux in Ligue 2.

"I can tell you a lot of players my age that were outstanding," he says. "I played with Allan Saint-Maximin. At 14 years old, we were at the same club in Paris, a club called ACBB. He was like he is today. Astonishing. He'd take the ball and dribble it everywhere. I wasn't that kind of young talent with a bright future, but I was the guy you knew loved what he was doing."

His Ligue 1 break soon came, but, again, it was in humble surrounds: Thuram signed for Guingamp a month before his 20th birthday. The move to the Stade de Roudourou was, he admits, "a slight adjustment" – an adjustment to top-flight football and an adjustment to carrying the scoring burden for a relegation-battling side.

"I remember I was seen as a player who made a lot of difference but never finished anything," Thuram says. "So playing as a striker in Guingamp and knowing that the team needs goals, it helped me and it gave me the responsibility to end whatever action I was starting."

> "I realised who my dad was when we came to Barcelona. I was ten, and I saw Ronaldinho. I understood then that my dad was training with Ronaldinho. That's when I got who my dad was"

Although Guingamp failed to stave off the drop in 2018-19, Thuram excelled, scoring 13 goals in all competitions. They hype train was gathering speed.

"I felt that [hype] after the game against PSG [a French League Cup quarter-final in which he scored a stoppage-time winner from the penalty spot] and after some games that were on national TV. I started seeing some transfer rumours. I understood that I was on the right path. It's always pleasant to know that some teams are looking at you."

Having proven himself in Ligue 1, Thuram wasn't going to follow Guingamp back down to the second tier. Of the many proposals he received for his next destination, one stood out in the opinion of his most trusted confidant.

"The first meeting with Gladbach, my dad had it without me," he says. "The same day he called me and told me he had a great feeling about this club and he went to visit it. If my dad tells me that he has a good feeling about a club, I'll trust him 100 per cent.

"At the time, I had a few friends who went to the Bundesliga – Kingsley Coman at Bayern, who went there very young, and there was Dayot Upamecano, Ibrahima Konate and Jean-Kevin Augustin at RB Leipzig. The Bundesliga is an incredible

Career highlight... Thuram celebrates scoring against Real Madrid

league. The fans are incredible. The style of play is wild. It's a good league to perform in and develop."

Fielded predominantly as a wide forward, Thuram has excelled in Germany by combining his natural gifts – speed, skill and creativity – with the goalscoring instincts honed back in Brittany. He scored 24 goals in his first two seasons with Gladbach. The highlights? A header against Roma in the Europa League – "The communion with the fans was amazing because it was a last-minute goal" – and a Champions League brace versus Real Madrid.

"The Champions League last year made me realise that those are the games I want to play," he says. "You feel there is a special thing in the air, I can't explain why. It's incredible, because there weren't fans. With fans, I can't imagine the beauty of the game. Champions League nights are really, really special."

More special still are summer international tournaments. Thuram played alongside Kylian Mbappe in France's victorious Under-19 European Championship squad in 2016, but his place alongside the Paris Saint-Germain superstar at the COVID-delayed Euro 2020 last summer marked an instant highlight in his international career thus far.

He'd made his debut for France the previous year, but, with such a wealth of options for Didier Deschamps to choose from, Thuram's selection for the tournament was anything but guaranteed. Gladbach were quarantining at a hotel ahead of their season-closing trip to face Werder Bremen when the Euro squad was announced.

"We were watching on my computer, with all the French guys in the room," he recalls. "We had our first wild reaction when we saw Karim Benzema was coming back. Then we had another wild reaction when we saw my name." He celebrated by scoring in a 4-2 win at the Weserstadion before linking up with *Les Bleus*.

"It was a great experience with amazing players and amazing games," Thuram says of the Euros, where France were eliminated in the round of 16. "Just to be there and see how they prepare and train, it was a boost for me and a really good moment.

"When games are close, the invisible work – what you eat, how you sleep, how you regenerate after the game and how you train for the next game – is really, really important. It's as important as the games."

The "invisible work" enabled Thuram to return from his knee injury sooner than expected earlier this season, making his comeback with a substitute's appearance in a 5-0 DFB-Pokal victory over Bayern Munich in October. With the transfer window closed, Inter's pursuit had extinguished, but the 24-year-old's focus never wavered.

"Inter is one of the biggest clubs in the world, so it was flattering to know that they wanted me," he says. "Coming back from the Euros, I just wanted to focus on myself, focus on the team and what I had to do for this season. I wanted to put myself in that tunnel vision to continue and not let other things distract me. That was my mindset when I came back."

Football talent and a strength of mentality is not all that Thuram has inherited from his father. Since retiring in 2008, Lilian Thuram has frequently spoken out on matters of racism, injustice and inequality. Marcus – who was named after Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey – shares his father's social conscience. In May 2020, he took a knee after scoring the first of his two goals against Union Berlin, dedicating the strike to the on-going protests in the Unites States in reaction to the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer.

Baby Thuram...Marcus with his father Lilian

"It's always been a part of my life," he says. "As a young black man, I know what I represent and I know what I need to do to help other people. It's just normal to react the way I reacted. Things are getting better and better, but we don't have to stop."

For some, the pressure of wearing such a prestigious name across their back would weigh heavy. Thuram is only elevated by his lineage. His outlook remains uncluttered by the expectations of others.

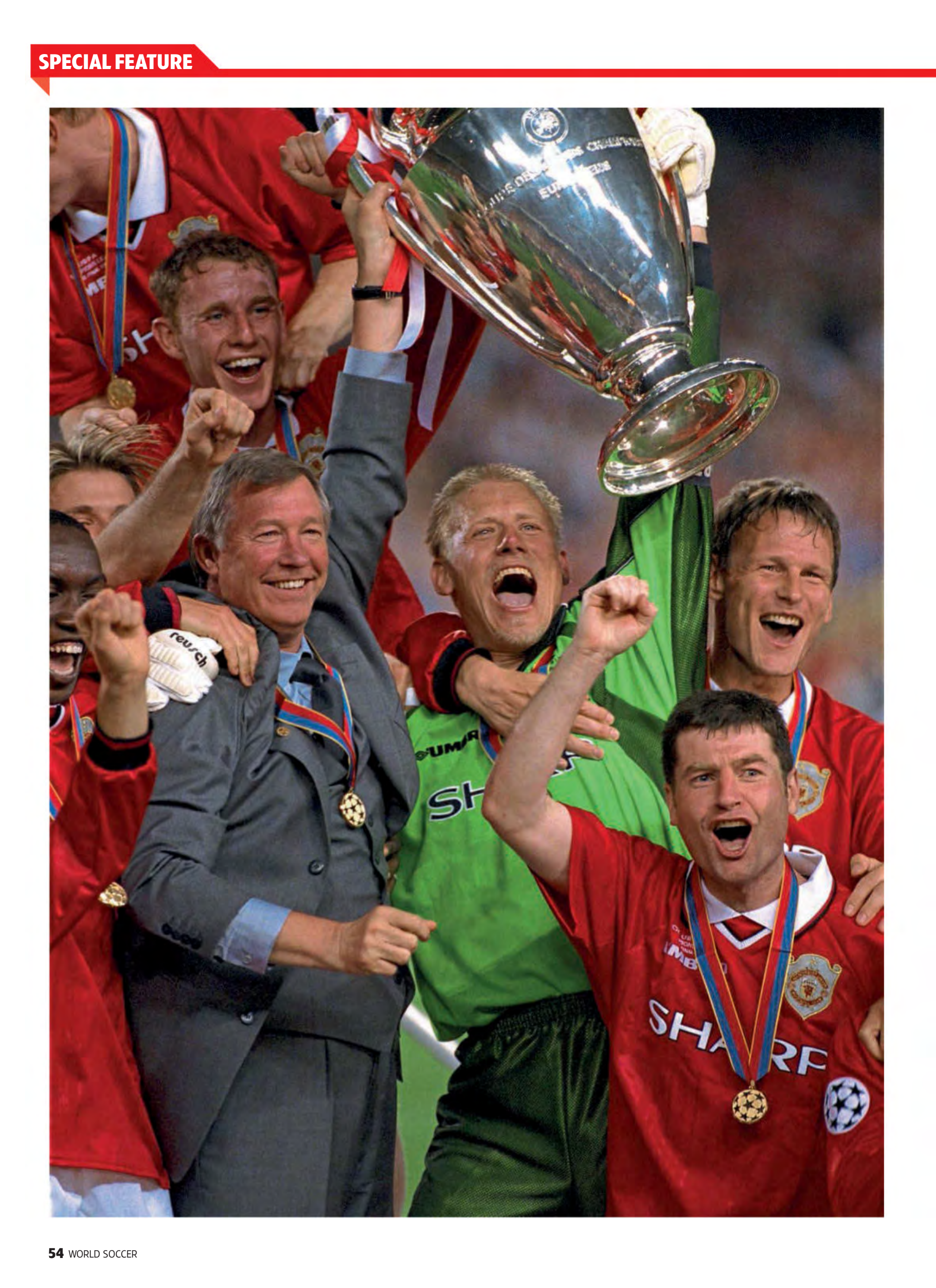
"I just wake up every day," he says, "and try to be the best version of myself."

WHEN ALASTAIR MET PETER...

A conversation between Alastair Campbell and goalkeeping great Peter Schmeichel…

Alastair Campbell: I learned a lot reading your book. I learned your real name is not Peter, but the Polish version. I learned you play the drums, guitar, and you've got a recording studio.
Peter Schmeichel: Not anymore. I did, in my time at Manchester United. It was brilliant because it took me away for hours at an end. Especially after the game when you've got so much adrenaline rushing through your system and it's very difficult to rest. So that was brilliant to have.
AC: Another thing that I never expected to see in a footballer's book, is this sentence: "I loved Milton Keynes." What is that about?
PS: Growing up, I was in love with England, in love with the football, in love with everything English. So, when I was in school, we had an exchange trip organised to Milton Keynes. I stayed with this family, who to my big regret I never had contact with again.
AC: We have to find them.
PS: That would be great. Mind you, we have to be careful. Right before

SHARP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SHARP

the 1999 Champions League final, because it was going to be my last game for Manchester United, the media in Denmark did loads of stories on me and my background. They sent me the tape and there is this guy on there, "Schmeichel's school teacher," and I'm thinking: "I don't know this guy!" He was never my schoolteacher. I had talked before about one specific schoolteacher who kind of got my life back on track because he paid an interest in my football. That guy was brilliant for me – unfortunately he passed away before the Champions League final. But this other guy was sat there pretending!

AC: So, talking of the Champions League. I was at that game, in Barcelona, and I remember all the craziness about it. But Kasper and Teddy Sheringham's son Charlie both got into the dressing rooms afterwards. How on earth?

PS: Unbelievable. I don't know how they did that. There is a lot of security at big Champions League matches. There are eight numbers on your accreditations. Depending on which one you had you're allowed to go to certain areas. For the dressing rooms, it's players and staff, no one else. And suddenly they were in there in the dressing room as we were celebrating. He was 13 then. We got pictures taken. It was brilliant we had that experience.

AC: The other football bit that I loved is where you said you scored more goals in your career than Gary Neville and Jamie Carragher combined. That's impressive.

PS: Jamie Carragher has actually scored the same number of goals as I have, but eight of them are own goals.

AC: Talking of Carragher and Liverpool, you said that, when you had that FA Cup final against Liverpool and you saw the "Spice Boys" come out, "we cannot lose to those suits." So even the clothing can act as a motivator.

PS: An FA Cup final is more than just a game. As we got closer to the final, Brian Kidd would always say: "Can you smell the hot dogs?" Because the old Wembley, once you came near the stadium it had that sort of smell – hot dogs. The second thing was that we had media days. The third thing was new suits. We always looked really smart. We got there, Liverpool were already on the pitch and we saw them – the white suits. They were not very nice. I mean look at them. We could not lose to those suits.

AC: Which of these two things means the most to you: winning the Euros with Denmark or winning the Champions League and the treble with United?

PS: None of them. My biggest one was when Kasper won the Premier League.

Spice boys..."We could not lose to those suits"

That was for me the most emotional.

AC: Which of those two before that happened?

PS: I honestly can't say. I'd pick a third one to that because I was on the team that won United's first league championship in 27 years. To be part of that was unbelievable.

AC: You do a lot of punditry now. Imagine you'd been a pundit at that final in Barcelona against Bayern Munich: after 90 minutes, who deserved to win?

PS: We did. We scored two goals.

AC: No, that came after 90 minutes.

PS: Finals are very difficult to judge. It's very emotional. You're always a little bit cautious compared to what you normally do. You won't take too many chances unless you have to. You try to organise yourselves. Had it been 0-0 at half-time, and gone into the second half and then they scored, it would have been a different match. I don't know who played the best – them defending that 1-0 lead, or us trying to break down this incredible organisation.

> "Jamie Carragher has actually scored the same number of goals as I have, but eight of them are own goals"

AC: I love your description of when you were getting chipped, and it hits the bar. It could have been 2-0. Did you sort of feel your life was crashing before you? And did you think once it didn't go in that you were going to win?

PS: We had this knack of just carrying on always and investing more and more in the game. For lack of a better word, I came up with "risk mode". In this risk mode you don't think about consequences. You gamble. You take chances. As a goalkeeper, that might be taking a step further forward than you normally would, hence the chip because that's an opportunity for them. Or you might defend with three players. From where I am I know it's going to be close. I know it can go in. I know there's a chance it might go past the goal and a chance it might hit the post and go either way. But I only prepare myself for the ball going wide or hitting the post. I'm not thinking it's going in. Have a look at how I react to that. I'm preparing for the ball to come back to me. Fortunately, it does. But that's risk mode. It's something we did so much in that season. We had Liverpool in the FA Cup, 1-0 down with two minutes to go and we win it 2-1; 0-0 with Charlton with a minute to go, we score and win it 1-0; the semi-finals in the FA Cup; the semi-finals in the Champions League against Juventus – we just did it so often in that season where we clawed something back from nothing.

AC: You've got some very interesting lines on Alex Ferguson: "Incredible leader. Very ordinary coach," you say. "Brilliant in defeat. Treated players differently. Two brains – one to focus on the present one to focus on the future." I love this one: you always knew when he was nervous because he sang or whistled. The thing that I was absolutely gobsmacked at, because I've heard him talk about football a lot, is that the one player that he was most terrified of was Steve McManaman.

PS: In the Premier League, definitely. We were all terrified of him.

AC: Just go through the "incredible leader, ordinary coach" analysis.

PS: He wasn't a very good coach. Brian Kidd, who was my coach for seven and a half of my eight years, was a brilliant coach. Love him. Absolutely fantastic. And Steve McClaren for the last six months. And when they weren't there, which wasn't often, Sir Alex would start the sessions and players would laugh

OPPOSITE: Ferguson and Schmeichel... "Alex Ferguson: Incredible leader. Very ordinary coach"

and he'd go: "Argh – you take over." The thing about good leadership is managers should never coach. A manager should always just observe. The manager's responsibility is not just to the first team, it's to every player in the club. So, what he always did was start training with us. He was there, he observed, and then he would wander off to the other teams, to connect with the coaches, connect with the players. Then he would come back to us. But if you coach, you cannot do that. And going on to one of your other points about the two brains – he'd have one brain for the current, here and now, and one brain for the future. He was always looking at the bigger picture for himself and bringing that to the squad.

AC: What about brilliant in defeat? What does that mean?

PS: A lot of managers take it out on the players if things don't go their way. He always made sure that you could move on to the next game. The thing about Fergie and the hairdryer is overdone. Yes, after games he could be very cross. He once went absolutely berserk at Ole [Gunnar Solskjaer]. Ole chased a player, I think it was Rob Lee from Newcastle, chased him down and just before the 18-yard line he took him down and got a red card. We lost the game. Fergie lost it. He went absolutely berserk. "That is not the way we do it. Those are not our values; we are much better than that". He would rather take the chance that the goalkeeper could save the ball than lose people. It was better to lose a second goal than lose a player. All the players were thinking: "Well done Ole, you took one for the team here." But he had real fury.

AC: How did it feel when you were in the tunnel against Manchester United playing against your old team-mates?

PS: Terrible. Not only for City but even for Aston Villa. I felt like a second-class player. That's my team and I'm supposed to be there. It was terrible.

AC: You've got a chapter that's entitled "The Long Mistaken Leaving of Manchester United." So, you wish you hadn't left?

PS: I'm 58 now. I look at all this with the knowledge I have now. I made a decision in a period of my life where now, at 58 years of age, I realise that I was in no condition to make that decision. I was completely drained. I was mentally drained. I had come back from the 1998 World Cup in France. We'd got knocked out by Brazil on July 3. We'd finished runners-up to Arsenal the year before and back then, runners-up had to qualify for the Champions League. So, we've got a play-off match, early August. Four weeks later. In the summer before I had an operation on my ankle and one on my elbow. I spent the whole holiday recuperating from that – not the break that you need. So, we've gone through the whole season, then the World Cup, and they tell me: "You can have one week." It takes you two or three weeks just to wind down. Your body needs to recover. I went away and came back a week later. As I'm driving into training, I'm thinking: "I can't do this. I really can't do this." The same thing the next day, and the next day.

Lisbon..."My first game for Sporting was fantastic"

AC: And you'd never had that before?

PS: Never. I'd been tired before, but not this. What I realise now, with the experience of my life, is that I was probably stressed. I was in no state to make decisions of that calibre. I am very proud. I'm this big strong guy, I'm meant to stay strong. A big thing about my playing style was that no one can beat me. I always had to feel superior. Strong. I thought at the time that talking about how I felt would make me weak. I should have talked, had conversations. I didn't talk to my family. I didn't speak to anyone. I made the decision that this was going to be my last season there.

AC: Nobody tried to talk you out of that decision? Fergie?

PS: Not really.

AC: Do you think he thought that once you were even thinking about moving on, effectively you'd moved on? That's what you mean about him always having his eye on the future?

PS: Yeah, I think when a player comes in and says that, he knows it's probably the right decision. He thinks: "Even if I try to persuade them to stay, I probably won't get the same out of them." Then came the stubbornness and the pride I had in myself. After the Champions League final there were small attempts to persuade me to stay. By then you've already packed the house down. Three weeks before, our house had been burgled. It all added to the sense that we had to move on.

AC: Knowing what you know now, how could you have handled the burnout that led to you leaving Manchester United, and do you think you might have ended up staying if you had?

PS: Yeah. Absolutely I would. Players today learn about stress. I'm absolutely sure that had I had what they have today, sports psychologists and so on, it would have been different.

AC: Did you not have that then?

PS: We had Sir Alex and Brian Kidd and that's it.
AC: Seriously?
PS: Yes. I was at Old Trafford recently. They've built next to the dugout a whole section for the coaches. Defensive coach, set-piece coach, specialist this, specialist that. One of the reasons is just a little bit of help for players who might find themselves like that.
AC: If you'd had that sort of support...
PS: I would have taken advantage of that and spoken to people, and I'm sure that if they had thought I was making the wrong decisions or told me that I would have changed my mind for sure.
AC: Your time in Portugal sounded a bit crazy.
PS: Again, I say this as a 58-year-old man, not as a player. I really enjoyed Portugal. My first game for Sporting was fantastic. I came into a club that hadn't won a championship for 18 years and were desperate to win a competition. We won the championship in my first year. Even though we had fantastic coaches and great players a lot of that was credited to me, and it wasn't really like that. I took it on because it was brilliant.
AC: And then you thought you were coming back to United?
PS: Yeah.
AC: You're very nice about Sir Alex in the book, but it sort of feels like you were betrayed there.
PS: I may have felt that in the moment, and yes, we had a deal for me to come back. Then he left me high and dry. Football wise, it was one of the worst days in my life. I had gone in and got my contract in Portugal annulled because I'd made a new deal with Manchester United to come back. We'd spoken to Alex Ferguson in the morning, and we'd actually spoken to him over the previous couple of weeks. Everything was good. Then we got the contract annulled and I came back out to the car and phoned him up – he didn't answer. Tried again. He didn't answer. Again. Didn't answer. Then eventually we got a hold of the chairman and he said: "It's out of my control, I think he's doing something else." By then we were nearly home, and I accidentally ran my dog over.
AC: Oh God!
PS: I took him to the vet, and they put him in hospital and said it'd be alright. I thought that's okay but what am I going to do now? I had to travel because I was joining up with Denmark for the Euros. When I landed in Copenhagen, I went to see some friends and had far too much to drink. I woke up the next day and there were 50 messages on my phone, all from my wife. The dog was dead. That was a bad day. A really, really bad day, on so many levels.

AC: That's obviously back to his two brains, present and future.
PS: Exactly. So, what he said was: "I have to look to the future." So, he's signing a goalkeeper who might be playing for the next ten years in his mind. And me, I'm 37 at the time. I might be playing one, two or three years. Who knows? That was his thinking. He's read the book and he says it's fantastic. He phoned me up and said: "The reason I didn't answer that phone call is I didn't know what to tell the big man." Fergie – he's afraid of me!
AC: Tell me about Kevin Keegan.
PS: I know I'm coming towards the end of my career and I'm thinking about the future. I want to go into management, I want to carry on in football and I want to work with Kevin Keegan at Manchester City. His Newcastle team was so exciting.

> "We had a deal for me to come back. Then he left me high and dry. Football wise, it was one of the worst days in my life"

I loved watching them. It was gung-ho football. I heard from everyone playing with him that he was a great manager, so that was a really big reason for me to go there. Another one was that my family really wanted to go back to Manchester. The kids wanted to go to their old school. They wanted that stability. So, I made a deal with them. They weren't the huge club they are now, they'd just been promoted to the Championship. In all fairness I did phone Sir Alex to say: "What do you think?' and he said: "Yeah, it's alright. Could be worse, could be Liverpool."

Then I arrived and I'm so sad to say this, but it was really a big disappointment. One of the things he'd done really well at Newcastle was to get some big names in and make them work together as a team. Here he was trying the same thing by getting big names in, but there was no way to make this group of players work. We had a young Joey Barton there who had a challenging childhood and fantastic talent. Had he played at Manchester United, had he been with Fergie, he could have been a top, top, top-class player. He would have been trained and brought up and educated to be that. But with Keegan, Joey was his playmate. Every afternoon they were playing head tennis together. He was kind of letting Joey become Joey as we know him when he could have done so much work with him. It was a shame because he could have been a fantastic player.

AC: What stopped you going into management?
PS: Time. Starting to do media work, having a really good time, being here, there and everywhere, going into studios. Then suddenly, 15 years had gone. It's too late for me now because a whole generation has gone past since I played. And it's also a very different game to the one I played and I'm not sure that I would completely understand the day to day of it.
AC: So, you've given up any thought of it?
PS: It's not that I've given up, you just never know. In the book I talk about ownership of clubs or having a role at a more strategic level. I've not given up completely. But I've always said it has to be the right opportunity. The life I have now, being connected with football as I am now, it's brilliant.

Manchester return..."That's my team and I'm supposed to be there"

JILL ROORD

"Winning Euro 2017 changed women's football in the Netherlands"

The Wolfsburg and Netherlands midfielder sits down with *World Soccer* to reflect on her career…

Your father played for FC Twente and represented the Netherlands at youth level. How much of an influence was he on you when you were growing up?
Yeah, he still is actually. He played professional football but he got injured really young, so he had to stop. Now we talk about football every day, he can't leave it. Sometimes it drives me crazy! We always analyse my games and he used to be my coach as well when I was younger. After a game, I want to know his opinion, because he knows me and what I can bring – or what I didn't bring in the game. He's had a big influence on my career definitely. Now I play closer to home, he's here almost every game to watch me live.

Who did you look up to and who were your footballing idols growing up?
Ronaldinho was one of my idols and I'm a big Lionel Messi fan. I have to admit that when I was younger women's football wasn't that big, so I wasn't really into women's football. I was just playing football and didn't even think that I'd be playing for a women's team later.

You left Arsenal to join Wolfsburg in the summer of 2021. How was your experience in North London?
I enjoyed my time at Arsenal. It was very different because I came from Bayern Munich, which was very structured and hard. We trained so much and didn't have much free time, but in England I actually had quite a lot of free time. Everything was pretty relaxed. We trained in the morning, went home and the rest of the day we were off. At Bayern, and also now at Wolfsburg, we have breakfast, training, lunch all together – you're way more with the team. I really enjoyed Arsenal, I had a good time. English life was more similar to life in the Netherlands, and the way I am – very chilled and laid-back. It was easy to play there.

And you got to play regularly with Vivianne Miedema…
She's one of the best players I've played with and in the world right now. I've known her since I was 13 and we've always been best friends. We first met in the Under-15s national team. We had this connection on the pitch and off the pitch, so we were always together for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We still are when we see each other at the national team. It's great to play with her. She has so much quality, so it's always fun to play with her.

How are you settling in to life at Wolfsburg?
It's been good. It's very professional here. From all of the clubs I've played for, it's the most professional in terms of physical and medical things. It's good to be in an environment like this and I really enjoy playing here. I really like the team we're building and the vibe is really good.

Career highlight...Roord celebrates her World Cup goal against New Zealand

How does the Bundesliga compare with the Women's Super League?
It's a very different culture, but also the football culture is different. In England it's more playing football, at least at Arsenal. We were really focused on ball possession and building up the game. In Germany it's higher tempo, more physical, more direct football. It's a different sort of football.

And how does the atmosphere compare in both leagues?
In England, especially in the past few years, it has the biggest atmosphere in Europe for sure. Women's football is very popular there. It's popular in Germany as well, but in England it's more crowded.

Your international career really took off in 2015 when you went to the World Cup. How was being part of that squad?
I was 18 then, really young. I'd been with the national team for just a few months, so it was my first big tournament. It was an amazing experience, but it was also hard. We had an old team, and Vivianne and I were the youngest ones. I was always with Viv. We were there for six or seven weeks, so it was quite hard to be away for that long. I remember the first game, walking on to the field with the crowd. You see it on television, but for me it was the first time. It was amazing.

You were also in the 2017 European Championship-winning squad...
That tournament changed women's football in the Netherlands. Obviously we won but, even from the first game, the atmosphere

Best mates...Roord with Vivianne Miedema

Goalscorer...Roord scored nine WSL goals in two seasons with the Gunners

was amazing. We had never experienced anything like that in women's football in the Netherlands. That was seriously a dream come true for everyone. Before the tournament, there wasn't really a strong belief that we could win the tournament. I think Dutch people tend to be quite confident, so we didn't fear any opponents, but we didn't think that we were going to win it because we hadn't won anything previously. During the tournament, we kept winning and winning, playing at home, and then suddenly we're in a final. I think it was then that everyone believed that we were going to win it.

Moving on to World Cup 2019. Where does scoring the winner against New Zealand rank among your career highlights?

Probably first place! I had been with the national team for four years, but I'd never really started. Before the tournament there was a lot of discussion, because the media was saying: "Roord should play", and I thought I should play, but Sarina Wiegman didn't pick me.

I was frustrated. It was my third tournament and I wanted to have an impact on the team – the two tournaments before I didn't really have that. I came on and scored immediately. It was a relief that I'd made my impact. I'd scored at a World Cup, which was a dream. My family were there too, so it was beautiful actually.

You came so close to winning the trophy. Did you expect to go so far and what was the sensation after losing to the United States in the final?

Going into the tournament, the media said we were the favourites and should be winning it. We said to each other that a World Cup is so different to the Euros. It's not realistic to say that we're going to win this as well, but we have a really good team and can be confident. I don't think we played that well, but we kept winning. We made the final against the USA, but it was too early for us to play them.

Going in to the game we knew that it was going to be tough, but we just wanted to enjoy the final. We were really proud, but we weren't on the USA's level.

> "We're a team that needs pressure, we like it"

You met the United States at the 2020 Olympics too, losing on penalties in the first knockout round...

We were a bit unlucky to be drawn with the USA so early in the tournament. But we did really have the belief that we would beat them. Except for the first 30 minutes, we were the better team. We had a lot of opportunities, including a saved penalty. We'd been very lucky in the past few years, so perhaps we didn't get the luck in the Olympics. We were all gutted that we didn't make it any further.

How was the general experience of being at the Olympics?

Obviously it was different with COVID. It was awful in terms of just being stuck in the hotel. We couldn't see anything and we weren't allowed to do anything, but playing the games and watching other sports was amazing. It was something magical and something so different from the Euros and World Cups. It was a massive experience.

All eyes now on Euro 2022 in England. Are you excited?

We're confident, very excited. England is not that far for Dutch people and with the fans in England, it will be an amazing tournament for sure. We should go really far but it's too early to say. We have a new coach [Mark Parsons] and things are developing. It's very different, he's not Dutch, so we talk in English and he brings a different culture. It's very different from what we're used to but I think it's something our team needs and will help us grow again.

Parsons replaced Sarina Wiegman after she took charge of England. What can you tell us about the Lionesses' manager?

We were very used to her because we had worked with her for so long, but I think for us, and for her, it's good to have something new after a while.

She's a bit of a control freak, always busy with football and tactics, very passionate about the job. Obviously for her it's very different as well because she needs to speak in English. Her English is fine, but to actually make your point or take a meeting in English is different.

The Netherlands will likely be one of the big favourites to win Euro 2022...

We're all used to it, we're all quite down to earth. I also think that we're a team that needs pressure, we like it. Maybe we are favourites; we could be. From the starting XI, there haven't been that many changes from our Euro 2017 squad. Maybe that's our strength as well. We all know each other very well; we've just got older, more mature, and more experienced.

Jared Tinslay

Glenn Moore

WSL clubs still waiting to make mark in Europe

Champions League group stage ends with Arsenal the only English team remaining

The apparently inexorable progress of the Women's Super League to pre-eminence has taken a blow in the UEFA Champions League with a series of chastening results for its trio of elite clubs.

The competition's expansion to three entries from the major leagues, instead of leading to more English clubs making the last eight, has resulted in fewer. Only Arsenal made the quarter-finals; Chelsea were despatched in the group stage while Manchester City did not even get that far.

And if those three aren't good enough, no one else is likely to be. Between them the trio have occupied the top three spots in every WSL season since 2014. They have also won the last nine Women's FA Cup finals and all ten League Cups. Well-funded by their men's clubs, they have squads of internationals including major overseas talent.

When Chelsea reached the 2021 Champions League final it seemed to indicate that the final barrier, European success, would soon be breached (no English club having won the competition since Arsenal in 2007).

However, the 4-0 thrashing Barcelona inflicted in Gothenburg looks to have had a major impact that continues into the current campaign.

In the second qualifying round this season there was another Anglo-Spanish match-up with Manchester City – quarter-finalists last season – beaten 2-1 on aggregate by Real Madrid.

City, in their defence, were caught cold. With many players having been at the Olympics they had injury problems and were barely in pre-season. Arsenal, though, had no excuses when, in the first group stage matchday, they were beaten 4-1 in Barcelona.

The Gunners were subsequently thrashed 4-0 at the Emirates in the return as the Catalans rubbed home their superiority. Given Barcelona's brilliance this was surprising, but not shocking. Not so the final matchday when Arsenal lost 4-1 at Hoffenheim; fortunately for them they had won 4-0 at home so limped into the last eight.

Chelsea, in a tricky group, won at Juventus but were held to home draws by the Italian champions and Wolfsburg. They were still well placed when, on the final matchday, they went to Wolfsburg needing only to avoid losing by more than one goal.

What followed was barely credible, as Chelsea lost 4-0 to a club whose best player, Pernille Harder, they had signed 15 months earlier. With Juve beating Servette by the same score Chelsea were out in a three-way head-to-head.

Manager Emma Hayes revealed the players were mentally in a bad place after a COVID-19 outbreak that threatened to prevent some going home for Christmas for a second successive year. That could explain their uncharacteristic collapse, but a failure to recruit defensive cover was also a factor.

> When Chelsea reached the 2021 Champions League final it seemed to indicate that European success would soon be breached…However, the 4-0 thrashing Barcelona inflicted in Gothenburg looks to have had a major impact

For Juventus, qualification for the latter stages was a landmark event, having hitherto fallen early in Europe.

Gulf in class…Mariona Caldentey celebrates scoring Barcelona's first goal against Arsenal in October

They were one of the clubs pushing hard for a group stage and under new manager Joe Montemurro, formerly of Arsenal, made the most of it.

They are the first Italian club to reach the last eight since 2016, the previous one being Brescia, who were taken over by Milan two years later.

Those two groups provided the drama in the new format. The other two were walkovers: PSG and Real Madrid cruised through Group B, Lyon and Bayern Munich did the same in Group D.

The draw for the knockout stages threw up a *Clasico* between Real and Barca. In the same half of the draw Arsenal meet Wolfsburg. The holders will be heavily favoured to progress.

The other quartet is more open, though Juventus, who will host the final, are outsiders. They meet Lyon, then the winners of PSG v Bayern. Lyon are slight favourites now that they are showing signs of regaining their domestic supremacy, and have Ada Hegerberg back.

Lyon had a 100 per cent record from their 11 league games before the winter break, notably hammering defending champions PSG 6-1. That result may be an outlier however, coming as it did ten days after the PSG camp had been rocked by the attack on Kheira Hamraoui. Those were the only league goals PSG had conceded all season.

The German league is so far a four-horse race, a situation all European leagues aspire to.

Bayern were the winter champions a point ahead of Hoffenheim, two clear of Wolfsburg with Eintracht Frankfurt a point further back. The Lady Wolves, for whom Jill Roord has proved a shrewd signing, had a game in hand. Unlike in the other big leagues, no team was unbeaten.

Dejected...Pernille Harder reacts to Chelsea's 4-0 loss to Wolfsburg

Juventus are on course for a fifth successive Serie A title in five years' existence, opening up an eight-point lead at the mid-season break. Sassuolo kept pace for a while but dipped to third behind Roma, while Internazionale ended 2021 as the form team beating, and edging ahead of, arch-rivals Milan. This quartet are likely to provide the late-season interest as they chase the second of Italy's two European slots.

Barcelona are even more dominant in Spain with a change of coach making little difference. The champions won all 15 of their matches before the Christmas break with a goal difference of +82, lifting them 11 points clear of Real Sociedad in second. The surprise was Real Madrid being in a relatively lowly sixth, 22 points behind Barca.

In the calendar year Barcelona played 56 matches in total winning 52, scoring 253 goals to 27. They lost to Manchester City in Europe, and drew with PSG, but won both ties. Their only domestic defeat was in June, 4-3 to Atletico Madrid, who also beat them on penalties in the Super Cup in January after a draw. Few teams anywhere, in any sport, are as dominant.

In England, Arsenal went into the break four points clear of Chelsea after the defending champions suffered a shock 1-0 defeat at Reading. Deanne Rose, the Canadian Olympic winner, ran through an unusually porous defence from her own half to score early on.

Arsenal, who had beaten an understrength Chelsea in the opening match of the season, have only dropped two points in their nine matches, at Tottenham, who reached the midway point in third after an impressive improvement under Rehanne Skinner.

The shock was the poor form of Manchester City. Stricken by injuries, especially in defence, they won seven points from their first seven games. Though they ended the half-season with successive wins they remained seven points behind Spurs in the third European qualifying place.

Maybe this is the year a new club breaks into the WSL's top three. An English triumph in Europe, however, may have to wait a bit longer.

THE DRAW

QUARTER-FINALS
Bayern Munich v PSG, Juventus v Lyon
Arsenal v Wolfsburg, Real Madrid v Barcelona
Ties to take place March 22/23 & 30/31

SEMI-FINALS
Real Madrid/Barcelona v Arsenal/Wolfsburg
Juventus/Lyon v Bayern Munich/PSG
Ties to take place April 23/24 & April 30/May 1

FINAL
Turin, May 22

Round-up

On the move...USA legend Alex Morgan

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

The rosters for NWSL newbies Angel City, of Los Angeles, and San Diego Wave are filling up. City have recruited US stars Christen Press (from Racing Louisville, for whom she never played) and Julie Ertz (Chicago Red Stars), plus Canadian Olympian Vanessa Gilles (Bordeaux). Wave signed US luminaries Alex Morgan (Orlando Pride) and Abby Dahlkemper (North Carolina Courage) plus England's Jodie Taylor (Orlando).

In other big NWSL trades involving US players, Ali Krieger and Ashlyn Harris joined NJ/NY Gotham from Orlando, while Sam Mewis and Jessica McDonald left North Carolina for Kansas City Current and Louisville respectively.

COURAGE SORRY

North Carolina Courage apologised to fans for any upset caused by re-signing Jaelene Daniels. In 2017, Jaelene Hinkle (as she was then known) rejected a call-up to the US national team because she would not wear a rainbow-themed shirt to mark Gay Pride month. At the time Daniels cited her Christianity for her objection.

LESS FAITH IN SHEBELIEVES

America's SheBelieves Cup has a less than stellar line-up this year. The combination of COVID-19 and a desire to prepare for Euro 2022 made major European nations less inclined to cross the Atlantic while the Asian Cup ruled out the likes of Japan and Australia.

So, after six years of top-notch opposition, the No.1-ranked US will be joined in the February round-robin by Iceland, New Zealand and Czech Republic.

New Angels... Julie Ertz and Christen Press

Meanwhile, England are putting on a new tournament with Germany, Canada and Spain providing Sarina Wiegman with her first elite opposition as England manager. France are hosting the Netherlands, Brazil and Finland.

FOY MAKES HISTORY

Women's football in Northern Ireland took a big stride forward after Jessica Foy became the first female player to sign a paid professional contract in the country's history. The Glentoran captain is expected to be joined by several of her team-mates, as Northern Ireland step up their efforts in professionalising the rest of their squad ahead of their first European Championship in England this summer.

Going pro... Jessica Foy

WINDOW SIGNINGS

WSL clubs were very active at the start of the transfer window. Danish veteran Sanne Troelsgaard joined Reading from Rosengard, young Russia full-back Alsu Abdullina signed for Chelsea from Lokomotiv Moscow, and Brighton recruited Swedish internationals Emma Kullberg and Julia Zigiotti Olme from Hacken.

Juventus had already moved for Julia Grosso, scorer of Canada's penalty shootout winner in the Olympic final, from her college team Texas Longhorns.

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- ❑ Newsstand
- ❑ Online

9. Where does *World Soccer* rank in the hierarchy of where you like to consume your football content?
- ❑ Very high
- ❑ High
- ❑ Average
- ❑ Low
- ❑ Very low

FROM THE EDITOR

World Soccer has been the unrivalled authority on football around the world since 1960. Under Kelsey Media and my stewardship, we have continued to ensure the magazine remains true to the principles that have made it an institution of football journalism for over 60 years.

Every issue has serious, hard-hitting opinions from the game's most respected writers who offer their expert analysis on football's burning issues. Our global correspondents cast the net far and wide to provide in-depth features and stunning imagery, often approaching big stories through the lens of those close to the scene to give you unprecedented access.

We provide face-to-face interviews with the game's biggest names: players, coaches, untapped talents and influential figures behind the scenes.

We shine the spotlight on the talented youngsters tipped for the top, highlighting tomorrow's stars today; something the magazine has always had a rich history and tradition of doing.

And how can we forget the essential previews of the World Cup and European Championship, special issues that have helped build *World Soccer*'s reputation as the "bible" of the global game.

Now, we don't want to change any of this, but what we do want is to gather your thoughts and opinions – on how you think *World Soccer* is currently doing, and to help shape the brand going forward; in both print and online.

We value your support and opinion, and we want to ensure that we get things right. You can complete this survey online or fill in this form and return it by post.

Thank you for taking the time to be part of shaping *World Soccer*'s future, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

It's quicker and easier to complete online at ***worldsoccer.com/survey***

10. What other titles/publications *(magazines, digital or websites)* do you read for your football content?
(tick all that apply)

- ❑ Daily newspapers
- ❑ *The Athletic*
- ❑ Sky Sports
- ❑ BBC Football
- ❑ *FourFourTwo* magazine
- ❑ Football podcasts
- ❑ Other *(please specify)*

11. What are your three favourite sections of the magazine?

12. What is your least favourite section of the magazine?

13. Who are your three favourite writers/columnists?

14. What would you like to see more of?

15. What would you like to see less of?

16. What is your opinion of the Results, Tables & Fixtures section at the back of the magazine?

- ❑ I love it. Having a comprehensive round-up of international results/line-ups, final domestic league tables, and continental club competition results helps wrap everything up nicely
- ❑ I'd prefer it to include international football results/ line-ups only
- ❑ I'd prefer it to include final domestic league tables only
- ❑ I'd prefer it to include continental club competition results only *(i.e. UEFA, CAF, AFC Champions Leagues, Copa Libertadores, etc.)*
- ❑ It's OK, but I'd prefer to allocate the pages towards extra features and articles in the magazine instead
- ❑ It's a total waste of paper – results, tables and fixtures are all available online now

17. Do you gamble on football?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

18. Would you like more women's football content, such as regular female footballer interviews?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

19. Would you like to have more English Premier League content included?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

20. Would you like to see regular retro kit features?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

21. What is your favourite regular annual edition of *World Soccer*?

- ❑ Domestic European season preview
- ❑ Domestic European season review
- ❑ UEFA Champions League preview
- ❑ Review of MLS, South American and Asian leagues
- ❑ The 500 most important players in the world
- ❑ *World Soccer*'s awards of the year special

22. Do you currently subscribe to *World Soccer*'s newsletter?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

23. How regularly would you like to receive *World Soccer*'s newsletter?

- ❑ Every week
- ❑ Every other week
- ❑ Once a month *(to coincide with the on-sale date of the magazine)*

24. Would you listen to a *World Soccer* podcast?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

25. Do you have any finals comments?

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The editor's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered in to.

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- ❑ **YES** I'd like to receive the e-newsletter from *World Soccer*
- ❑ **YES** I am happy for *Kelsey Media* to contact me by email

Name:
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World Service

INCORPORATING Global diary

Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

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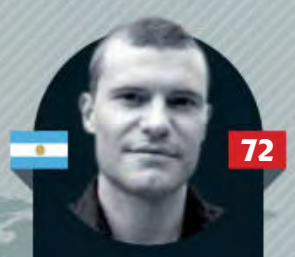
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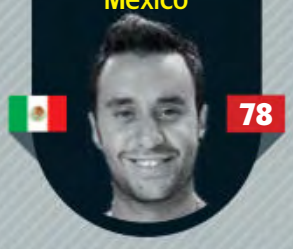
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The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

£100m

Value of Southampton takeover by Serbian Dragan Solak, who has acquired an 80 per cent stake in the Premier League club.

100

Premier League red cards received by Arsenal – the first team in the competition's history to reach the milestone.

€11m

Reported annual salary of Napoli and Italy forward Lorenzo Insigne when he joins Major League Soccer side Toronto FC this summer on a contract until 2027.

MLS-bound ...Lorenzo Insigne

€2.1bn

Value of an investment in the top 42 clubs in Spanish men's football by private equity fund CVC Capital Partners in exchange for an 8.2 per cent stake in a new company that will manage sponsorship and broadcasting revenues.

4

Decades in which Crystal Palace manager Patrick Vieira has received a Premier League yellow card, both as a player and a coach.

2

Clubs that Real Madrid and Brazil left-back Marcelo has become a part-owner of following his investment in Portuguese second-tier side Mafra.

104

Number of Serie A goals scored by Internazionale in 2021 – the first side to score over 100 goals in the competition in a calendar year since Milan in 1950.

3

English clubs with over 7,000 top-flight goals: Everton, Liverpool and now Arsenal, who passed the milestone in December.

43

Bundesliga goals scored by Robert Lewandowski in 2021, a tally which breaks the all-time record for German top-flight goals in a calendar year.

4

Managers to have taken charge of over 600 Premier League games after David Moyes joined Arsene Wenger, Sir Alex Ferguson and Harry Redknapp.

400m

Brazilian reais that legendary Samba striker Ronaldo will pay to acquire a 90 per cent stake in his first club Cruzeiro.

3

Consecutive years that Belgium have finished at the top of FIFA's world rankings, having first gone top in September 2018.

The Cathedral...design of Milan and Inter's new stadium

2027

Move-in date for Internazionale and Milan into their new stadium "The Cathedral", replacing the San Siro as their shared ground.

42

Games that Crystal Palace forward Jordan Ayew went without scoring in the Premier League, before ending his drought against Southampton in December.

502

Number of career games Napoli head coach Luciano Spalletti had managed by the end of 2021. He marked his 500th match in charge against Empoli – a team he both played for and managed.

On top of the world...Belgium

£30m

Investment by Barclays bank into women's football, a deal that includes sponsorship of both the WSL and Women's Championship.

32

Footballers to have scored over 100 career Premier League goals after Manchester City's Raheem Sterling made it to a century.

Record breaker... Guardiola

207

Premier League games that it took Pep Guardiola's Manchester City to score 500 goals – the quickest manager to reach the tally in the competition's history.

27

Minutes of stoppage time ten-man Cambridge United survived during their 0-0 League One draw with Portsmouth in January.

Niue

STEVE MENARY

Bouncing back... football in Niue

Cast away

Tiny Pacific island of Niue are attempting to bounce back after expulsion from the Oceania Football Confederation

The ejection of Niue from the Oceania Football Confederation was hotly contested by officials on the tiny South Pacific island, but it has at least resulted in football activity increasing.

After a meeting of the OFC executive committee on March 3 2021, the associate membership of the Niue Islands Soccer Association was revoked after what the confederation describes as a decade of inactivity.

The islanders only found out via a report on *Radio NZ Pacific*, and NISA secretary Jama'l Talagi claims that their ejection was based on a report written back in 2017.

"They say they exhausted all avenues trying to contact us but where have they got that information from?" asks Ms Talagi. "For years OFC refuse to talk to Niue. I don't think that they are interested in the small countries like Niue."

NISA was founded in the early 1980s with around ten clubs drawn from the island's 14 main settlements. Niue entered the football tournament at the 1983 South Pacific Games in Samoa, but were hammered 14-0 by Tahiti and 19-0 by Papua New Guinea and have not taken part since.

Ms Talagi admits that organised sport on an island of 1,600 people can be "a bit of a mess", but blames the faltering development of football that led to Niue's ejection on lack of OFC attention.

> "OFC have no verifiable representative of the Niue Islands Soccer Association who contacted us for over ten years. They had no registration as an association and no football league in Niue"
>
> OFC statement

She adds: "The OFC fail to acknowledge that Niue was neglected for many years under the leadership of Tai Nicholas [former OFC chairman], and we know of the issues happening at OFC but they did not approach Niue properly."

The relationship between Niue and the OFC has long been fragile. Niue officials were invited by the OFC to a sport for social development event in 2010 only to be snubbed. "The day that our officials arrived in New Zealand, they came to the [OFC] office and were ghosted," says Ms Talagi. "They lost interest after that."

After that visit, NISA were awarded a grant of around $7,000 to buy futsal equipment and staged a tournament the following year. Four years passed before another tournament was staged with Vaiea – a village where many Tuvaluans live – emerging as winners in 2015.

In 2019, OFC general secretary Nicholas was banned for eight years for financial misconduct by FIFA, which also banned former president David Chung for six years. Under new president Lambert Maltock, the OFC gave development grants to two associate members, Kiribati and Tuvalu, but cut links with Niue.

An OFC spokesperson says: "OFC have no verifiable representative of the Niue Islands Soccer Association who contacted us for over ten years. They had no registration as an association and no football league in Niue."

That explanation remains disputed on Niue but after their ejection a group of 30 islanders held a meeting and staged a tournament in August between ten teams with Vaiea again triumphant.

Instead of staging one-off tournaments, NISA plans a regular season starting in February 2022 and has bigger plans. Ms Talagai explains: "We would like to develop Niue football players and work together with the Niue community in New Zealand to take a team to regional competitions such as the South Pacific Games. We would definitely need OFC help."

The Auckland-based OFC says it would welcome a new membership application and Niue's High Commissioner to New Zealand Fisa Pihigia is well placed to help, as he is also NISA president.

Banned...former OFC boss Tai Nicholas

Club World Cup

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Final host... Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium

Preview

UAE hosts Club World Cup

Could the title move away from Europe for the first time since 2012?

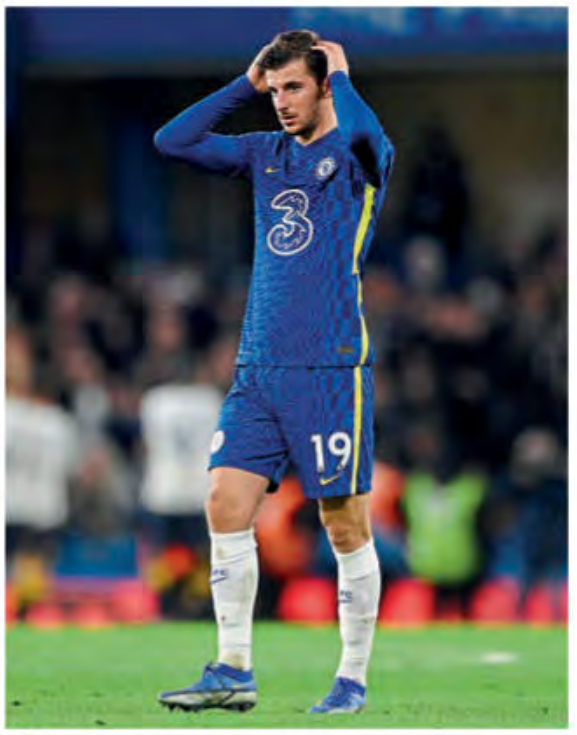
A successor to the Intercontinental Cup and its unpretentious format, the Club World Cup has always endured existential questions: what does the tournament mean? To Europe it's a nuisance; to South America and the rest of the world it means everything. To FIFA, it is a vehicle not only to remain relevant in the club game, but also to expand its influence, while also acquiring a new revenue stream alongside its golden goose, the World Cup.

Lately, in modern football's disorienting and dislocated era, these questions have become even more pertinent. This edition, shoehorned into a wildly congested calendar and a global health crisis, is stretching the patience of those involved beyond the limit.

With the Champions League knockout stage in February, Chelsea, the European champions, have far more important matters on their mind. Will they even send their full-strength team? Sao Paulo giants Palmeiras will be preparing for the new Brazilian domestic season after a gruelling 2021 campaign that involved more than 90 matches. Egypt's Al Ahly will be disadvantaged because of a fixture clash with the Africa Cup of Nations.

And FIFA and its president? Much to his frustration, Gianni Infantino's pet project of an expanded 24-team, larger-than-life global tournament, feeding off supposed continental super leagues and corresponding global super clubs, has been thwarted by reality.

Hence, the world federation resuscitated the seven-club format that has been organised every December since 2005. The 2021 iteration was shifted away from Japan to the United Arab Emirates; South Africa briefly flirted with the idea of bidding for



Under pressure...Chelsea's squad has already been severely tested this season

Hungry...Palmeiras have their sights on the trophy in only their second Club World Cup appearance

the hosting rights, but the pandemic and other logistics proved too much.

In Abu Dhabi, the rest of the world will once again try to dethrone Europe. Incidentally, the last time that the European side failed to win the tournament was Chelsea. In 2012, the Blues lost in the final to Sao Paulo behemoths Corinthians, who became the third Brazilian team to claim the world crown, courtesy of a Paolo Guerrero header. Sitting back, guided by defensive-minded coach Tite, the ethos and manner of victory were disappointing yet also a recognition of Europe's vast superiority: Corinthians could only stifle Chelsea, could only prevent the London club from playing.

Chelsea, the European champions, have far more important matters on their mind. Will they even send their full-strength team?

CONCACAF champions... Monterrey

Goalkeeper Cassio was the man of the match while his team had just two attempts on target.

All of the South American triumphs – all of them Brazilian – have been based on that same principle: the acknowledgement of Europe's supremacy and the pointlessness of going toe-to-toe. Palmeiras, then, will organise, defend and lurk on the counter, a smash-and-grab blueprint in the image of Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira's philosophy. It was the success recipe to win back-to-back continental crowns, a rare feat. The club however have never won the global crown, even though they claim that victory in an international tournament in 1951 counts as one. In reality, local rivals Santos, Sao Paulo and Corinthians, their arch rivals, can all boast of victories in the Intercontinental Cup or today's equivalent. That hurts and haunts Palmeiras.

There is one huge caveat: the Brazilians need to survive the semi-finals stage. Last year, Tigres UANL, spearheaded by idiosyncratic French striker Andre-Pierre Gignac, eliminated Palmeiras – a huge disappointment as well as a reality check. In the quarter-finals, Mexico's Monterrey will be confident of success against African champions Al Ahly.

On the other side of the draw, hosts and UAE champions Al Jazira, Tahiti's AS Pirae (a late replacement for Auckland City) and Saudi Arabian giants Al Hilal complete the field in a three-way dogfight for the right to face Chelsea in the semi-finals. In the past editions, the European champions have taken the competition with varying degrees of seriousness. Last year, Bayern Munich defeated Tigres in low-energy mode to complete Hansi Flick's six-trophy victory parade, but in 2019 Liverpool and a diplomatic Jurgen Klopp, victims of a brutal schedule, fielded two different teams in two different competitions half a world away in the space of 48 hours.

The rebuilding of the international match calendar will increase the demands the modern game puts on the players. In the name of greed, it will stretch the bodies of the footballers to the limit. Even in a COVID-19 ravaged landscape, football always wants more, hell-bent on bigger and more lucrative formats. However, would a 24-team Club World Cup not just become another unloved tournament?

THE DRAW

FIRST ROUND

1. Al Jazira (UAE) v AS Pirae (Tah)

SECOND ROUND

2. Al Ahly (Egy) v Monterrey (Mex)

3. Al Hilal (KSA) v Match 1 winner

SEMI-FINALS

4. Palmeiras (Bra) v Match 2 winner

5. Chelsea (Eng) v Match 3 winner

MATCH FOR FIFTH PLACE

6. Match 2 loser v Match 3 loser

MATCH FOR THIRD PLACE

7. Match 4 loser v Match 5 loser

FINAL

8. Match 4 winner v Match 5 winner

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

River Plate back on top

Marcelo Gallardo's side win their first title since 2014

River Plate brushed aside all competition to extend their record as the most successful team in the history of Argentina's top flight with three games to spare. Beyond the metrics of the seven-point difference at the top, the most goals scored, the most possession and the joint-best defence, it was a side that exhibited the competitiveness and verve that has come to be the trademark of the club under coach Marcelo Gallardo.

While River claimed the title as their 37th, others insist that it was in fact their 36th. The exact nature of the 1936 Copa de Oro, which River won, is disputed: some historians of Argentine football consider it to be a national cup rather than a league title. Nevertheless, their status as the country's most successful team is beyond dispute.

In their latest triumph, *Los Millonarios* were led by one of the great talents to have emerged from the Argentine league in recent years: 21-year-old attacker Julian Alvarez. Already included in Lionel Scaloni's national team set-up, "*Arana*" (Spider) has flourished in the past year as a complete forward, scoring off both feet or in the air, from tight angles, outside the box or tap-ins, while displaying strength, skill and a formidable work-rate. The centre-forward hit 18 goals in 25 games, and a move to Europe is surely not far away.

Alvarez was aided by a side that Gallardo had largely rebuilt this year. Agustin Palavecino, joint-top of the league's assist charts with eight,

Champions... River delight

Club legend...coach Marcelo Gallardo

Consolation... Boca won the Copa Argentina after a tough season

was the standout figure of a midfield that included prospects Enzo Fernandez and Santiago Simon. Although Gallardo still called on veterans like Enzo Perez in midfield, defender Javier Pinola and goalkeeper Franco Armani, this was a new side.

It was the 13th trophy in seven and a half years for Gallardo, who then swiftly added a 14th after beating Copa de la Liga Profesional champions Colon 4-0 in the Champions Trophy on December 18.

The league title was the only major trophy missing from his personal haul as coach at the Monumental, having already won two Copas Libertadores, the Sudamericana, as well as domestic trophies. After an unusually long tenure, and with his contract due to expire in December, finally winning the league would have been a fitting send-off.

There were also overtures from Montevideo to lure Gallardo across the river to replace Oscar Tabarez as Uruguay's national team coach. Yet he decided to stay "at least one more year" before *La Celeste* appointed Diego Alonso instead. There are perhaps still more items on his to-do list at River.

One will be reasserting River in continental competition. For all of River's dominance at home, the side were hammered 4-0 on aggregate in the Copa Libertadores quarter-finals by Brazilian champions Atletico Mineiro. River were the only Argentine representatives in the last eight – a stark reality that brought about an existential crisis over the state of the national game. 2022 will be a litmus test for Argentine sides. Velez Sarsfield, Talleres and Estudiantes all earned qualification for the competition after their league performances, along with Colon and Boca Juniors.

Boca are still reeling from VAR decisions against Atletico Mineiro in the last 16 of the Libertadores, but the fallout spilt over into a league campaign that was only just starting. With no victory in the first six matches, Boca were in the bottom three in a division of 26 teams. Veteran coach Miguel Angel Russo departed, making way for 41-year old Sebastian Battaglia.

With 17 titles at the Bombonera, the former midfielder is the club's most decorated player. He looked to a number of youth-team players to turn the fortunes around and results improved, though performances did not. "Boca cannot continue playing like this", said former player and analyst Diego Latorre, echoing what many supporters already knew. Boca ended the season fourth but did win the Copa Argentina on penalties. The silverware offered a much-needed morale boost after sub-standard performances and a series of distracting off-the-pitch micro-scandals.

Russo was just one of the 17 coaches to leave over the course of a short season which offered little risk. In the first months of the pandemic in 2020 the AFA decreed there would be no relegation for two years. Yet the eccentric and improvised league structure will continue to morph and shift. In 2022 there will be a bloated 28 teams in the Primera Division. The latest approved plan includes two promotions and two relegations for 2022, only for the format to change again and gradually reduce the number of sides in the top flight to 22 by 2026.

***Los Millonarios* were led by one of the great talents to have emerged from the Argentine league in recent years: 21-year-old attacker Julian Alvarez**

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Julian ALVAREZ (River Plate)
The complete package who spearheaded River's attack, producing 24 goals and assists combined in 25 league games.

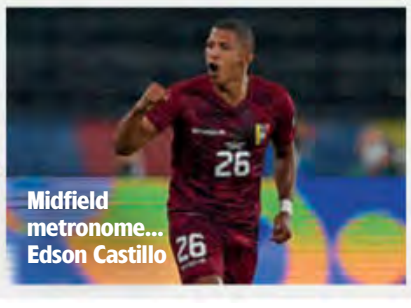
Goal machine... Julian Alvarez

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Marcelo GALLARDO (River Plate)
El Munyeco (The Doll) is River Plate's most successful coach of all time and quashed rumours he would leave the club to stay on at the Monumental for "at least one more year".

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Facundo FARIAS (Colon)
Adopted by his agent after his father and grandfather died of COVID-19, River and Boca are both chasing the exciting 19-year-old attacker.

SOUTH AMERICAN LEAGUES REVIEW

	HOW THE LEAGUE WAS WON	CONTINENTAL QUALIFIERS	PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Bolivia PRIMERA DIVISION	On a dramatic final day, leaders The Strongest slipped up, losing 1-0 to Santa Cruz and were overtaken by Always Ready and **Independiente Petrolero**, who came from behind to win their game and snatch their first title after a lengthy top-flight absence.	**Independiente Petrolero** and **Always Ready** go into the group phase of the Libertadores, with **The Strongest** and **Bolivar** having to make do with the qualifiers. Into the Sudamericana go **Royal Pari**, **Oriente Petrolero**, **Jorge Wilstermann** and **Guabira**.	**Carmelo Algaranaz** (Always Ready) Stocky little support striker who had been considered a promise for some time, and turned that into reality in a splendid year. Busy presence who hustled defenders and scored a stream of goals.
Chile PRIMERA DIVISION	**Universidad Catolica** won a fourth consecutive league title, shrugging off a slow start to overtake Colo-Colo and finish six points clear. The other Santiago giants, Universidad de Chile, scored two stoppage-time goals on the final day to avoid relegation.	**Universidad Catolica** and **Colo-Colo** go into the Libertadores group phase, with **Audax Italiano** and cup runners-up **Everton** in the qualifying rounds. The Copa Sudamericana quartet are **Union La Calera**, **Union Espanola**, **Antofagasta** and **Nublense**.	**Marcelino Nunez** (Universidad Catolica) Dynamic 21-year-old midfielder whose second season was consistently impressive. Added thrust, assists and goals, and looked comfortable when given a chance in the national team.
Colombia PRIMERA A	Colombia plays two championships a year, both ending in a two-legged final. **Tolima** came close to being the first side to win both for eight years. They beat Millonarios 3-2 on aggregate to take the Apertura, but lost the Finalizacion 3-2 on aggregate to **Deportivo Cali**.	**Tolima** and **Deportivo Cali** go into the Libertadores group phase, while **Millonarios** and cup winners **Atletico Nacional** must negotiate the qualifying rounds. Into the Copa Sudamericana go **Junior**, **America**, **La Equidad** and cup runners-up **Independiente Medellin**.	**Sergio Mosquera** (Tolima) Imposing centre-back, dominant in the air and with a fearsomely hard shot. Stops goals and saves them, and his injury early in the first leg of the Finalizacion final may well have cost his team the title.
Ecuador SERIE A	The season culminates in a dispute between the winners of the two league stages. On a pair of very wet nights, **Independiente del Valle** beat Emelec 4-2 on aggregate – a first national title for this impressively-run club from the outskirts of Quito.	**Independiente del Valle** and **Emelec** are through to the group stage of the Libertadores, with **Barcelona** and **Universidad Catolica** into the qualifiers. **9 de Octubre**, **LDU**, **Mushuc Runa** and **Delfin** go into the Copa Sudamericana.	**Lorenzo Faravelli** (Independiente del Valle) IDV are known for producing talent, but they also have an eye for players with untapped potential, like this Argentine midfielder. His bright push-and-run game is the team's beating heart.
Paraguay PRIMERA DIVISION	The ten teams play two separate tournaments. In May, **Libertad** won the Apertura by a five-point margin, while **Cerro Porteno** won the Clausura, snatching the title away from Guarani with two stoppage-time goals in a final day top-of-the-table clash.	**Libertad** and **Cerro Porteno** go into the group stage of the Libertadores, with **Guarani** and **Olimpia** entering qualifying. The Sudamericana clubs are **Nacional**, **Guairena**, cup runners-up **Sol de America** and second-tier champs **General Caballero JLM**.	**Claudio Aquino** (Cerro Porteno) The Argentine attacking midfielder stands out for his tight ball control and the intelligence of his creative play. Now 30, he has played his best football in Paraguay, first with Guarani in 2019 and now with Cerro Porteno.
Peru LIGA 1	Relegated in 2020, **Alianza Lima** were reinstated on a technicality in March. Theirs was the perfect comeback. The season ended with a two-legged final between the two phase winners, where Alianza beat Sporting Cristal 1-0 on aggregate.	**Alianza Lima** and **Sporting Cristal** go into the Libertadores group stage, with **Universitario** in the second qualifying stage and **Universidad Cesar Vallejo** in the first. The Copa Sudamericana qualifiers are **Melgar**, **Cienciano**, **Sport Boys** and **Ayacucho**.	**Hernan Barcos** (Alianza Lima) Much-travelled veteran Argentine centre-forward, nicknamed "the pirate", whose hold-up play and goals were vital to the cause. Scored the title-winning goal in the final play-off.
Uruguay PRIMERA DIVISION	In a convoluted championship, the Apertura and Clausura winners, Plaza Colonia and **Penarol**, met to decide who would meet the team with most accumulated points over the season, also Penarol. Since they won the semi (on penalties) there was no need for a final.	Based on points over the season, **Penarol** and **Nacional** go into the group stage of the Libertadores, with **Montevideo City Torque** and **Plaza Colonia** into the qualifiers. Into the Sudamericana go **Cerro Largo**, **Wanderers**, **Liverpool** and **River Plate**.	**Facundo Torres** (Penarol) The left-footed attacker missed some of the campaign through injury, but when present his perky talent was both decisive and delightful, and his understanding with young striker Agustin Alvarez was a highlight.
Venezuela PRIMERA DIVISION	COVID forced an improvisation, with 21 clubs divided into eastern, central and western groups, with the top two of each advancing. It all boiled down to a final between the traditional top two, with **Deportivo Tachira** beating Caracas on penalties after a goalless draw.	**Deportivo Tachira** and **Caracas** go straight to the Libertadores, with **Monagas** and **Deportivo Lara** in the qualifiers. **Deportivo La Guaira**, **Estudiantes de Merida**, **Metropolitanos** and top-flight debutants **Hermanos Colmenarez** are in the Copa Sudamericana.	**Edson Castillo** (Caracas) Caracas caught the eye with a free-scoring front three, including two African strikers. Balancing it all out behind them in midfield was Castillo, covering space, winning tackles and putting moves in motion.

COACH OF THE YEAR		NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR	NEXT SEASON
Marcelo Robledo (Independiente Petrolero) Carried a squad heavy on journeyman veterans all the way to an extraordinary first title. Born in Argentina, he played his entire career in Bolivia, before staying to launch his coaching career.	Champions... Independiente Petrolero	**Jeyson Chura** (The Strongest) Teenage support striker with a neat turn of pace and a wonderfully whippy left foot. Shown such promise that he has been fast-tracked into the senior national squad, and played in the Copa America.	The switch to one year-long tournament proved short-lived; the pre-pandemic format of Apertura and Clausura championships will return in 2022. The Copa Bolivia, which was last played in 2016, will also be played again.
Cristian Paulucci (Universidad Catolica) The Argentine stepped up from assistant to caretaker after the departure of Gus Poyet, and turned the season into a triumph with 13 wins in 14 games – surely enough to be handed the job permanently.	Breakthrough...Marcelino Nunez made his Chile debut this year	**Brayan Hurtado** (Cobresal) The latest talented import to Chile from Venezuela. On loan from Mineros, he made a big impression attacking from wide spaces, and will probably soon be moving to a bigger club in Chile or elsewhere.	Automatic promotion/relegation sees two clubs going down and only one coming up, so the top-flight championship will now contain 16 clubs rather than the unwieldy 17. The league will start early in 2022 to allow fixtures to be completed before the Qatar World Cup.
Hernan Torres (Tolima) Has a long association with Tolima as goalkeeper, assistant and now in his second spell as coach. His sides are usually well balanced, and Tolima were undoubtedly the team of the year.	Imposing... Tolima defender Sergio Mosquera	**Emerson Rodriguez** (Millonarios) The brightest of an interesting crop of young attackers at the Bogota club – a right-winger with pace, and the capacity to go outside or cut into the penalty area, where he has emerged as a real goal threat. Middle name is Rivaldo.	The same format will be followed again with 20 teams playing two separate championships, with a league stage followed by play-offs involving the top eight. The format of this can vary – either straight knockout or two groups of four. Both were used in 2021.
Renato Paiva (Independiente del Valle) Portuguese coach who has the honour of taking the club to a first domestic title – an achievement all the more impressive because the most promising players are sold during the season.	Champions... Independiente del Valle	**Nilson Angulo** (LDU) The teenager is a rangy support striker with a turn of pace and sustained speed, plus the ability to finish with either foot. He has already made his debut for Ecuador and should be a real handful as he fills out physically.	The current format will continue, with the 16 clubs playing two separate league stages, and the winners meeting in a two-legged final to dispute the title. The recent decline of Deportivo Quito and El Nacional has opened up space for less traditional clubs.
Daniel Garnero (Libertad) Libertad is the Argentine's fourth Paraguayan club since arriving in 2015. This season he built an attractive side, took them to a domestic title and, in a poor year for Paraguay in continental comps, reached the Sudamericana semis.	Player of the Year... Aquino	**Julio Enciso** (Libertad) The exciting, incisive support-striker already has a league title to his name at the tender age of 17. Being brought along carefully, but was part of the national team squad for the Copa America.	The current format will be retained, with the Apertura and Clausura tournaments played between ten teams. The Super Copa between the cup winners and the team with most league points is also here to stay; Olimpia beat Cerro Porteno to the inaugural trophy.
Carlos Bustos (Alianza Lima) Argentine coach who took charge expecting to play in the second division and ended up winning the first, basing his team wisely on tight defence. Alianza conceded just 17 goals in 28 games.	Next Solano... Jhilmar Lora (L)	**Jhilmar Lora** (Sporting Cristal) Quick and talented right-back who established himself in 2021, breaking into the Peru squad and earning comparisons with a young Nolberto Solano.	During the COVID-19 pandemic all football was restricted to the capital, Lima. The hope for 2022 is that normality can return, with a nationwide tournament comprised of two separate stages played on a league basis, leading to a two-legged final.
Eduardo Espinel (Plaza Colonia) Honours rarely leave Montevideo, but in 2016 Espinel launched his career by taking the Clausura 100 miles along the coast for Colonia's first title. Five years later, he has taken them to the Apertura, with hard work and a tight defence.	Talented... Facundo Torres	**Nicolas Marichal** (Nacional) The 20-year-old centre-back made his debut in February and caught the eye with the speed of his defensive covering. Likely to be handed plenty of responsibility in 2022.	COVID-induced time restrictions meant the 2021 season was restricted to the Apertura and Clausura, with 16 teams playing on a league basis. 2022 should see the return of the Intermedio, played in between the two, where the teams are divided into groups.
Juan Domingo Tolisano (Deportivo Tachira) Young coach who has come close before, but has now landed the big title. His team were impressive all year, and victory was all the sweeter with the final being played at the home of the opponents.	 Midfield metronome... Edson Castillo	**Yerson Chacon** (Deportivo Tachira) Son of a former international, the teenage attacking midfielder is an exciting talent – slightly-built but gifted with a wide skill-set, including admirable calm in possession and a vicious shot.	The hope is that 2022 will see the return to the fully-national format, this time with 19 teams, featuring Apertura and Clausura tournaments and the two winners meeting to define the overall champions.

Compiled by Tim Vickery

United States

JAMES NALTON

Review

The big trophy in the Big Apple

New York City FC end their wait for MLS glory

Winning kick... Alexander Callens scores from the penalty spot

It's taken 26 years for the MLS Cup to make its way to New York City but, at the end of the 2021 season, the club bearing the city's name triumphed in the play-offs to bring the trophy to the USA's most populous area.

As a 2015 expansion side, this was only New York City FC's seventh season in Major League Soccer, but big things have always been expected of a franchise that is part of one of football's emerging global powers, the City Football Group.

The network was put to good use to sign 2021 MLS Golden Boot winner Valentin "Taty" Castellanos, who arrived in 2019 from City Football Group's Uruguayan club, Montevideo City Torque. The Argentine went on to top the scoring charts in the play-offs too, alongside Nashville's Hany Mukhtar, but City's route to the final wasn't easy. Having finished fourth in the Eastern Conference and eighth overall, they

First-time winners... MLS Cup champions New York City FC

Top goalscorer... Valentin Castellanos

wouldn't have expected it to be so.

They had to get past 2018 MLS Cup winners Atlanta United in the first round, which they did thanks to goals from Castellanos and Peruvian centre-back Alexander Callens. The latter's name was to feature regularly in key moments throughout the play-offs.

The eventual champions then eliminated the 2021 Supporters' Shield winners, New England Revolution. They needed penalties in the Eastern Conference semi-finals to do so, with Callens cannoning the winning spot-kick past USMNT goalkeeper Matt Turner.

As New England exited on the Eastern side of the draw, Western Conference champions Colorado Rapids also fell at the first hurdle, losing 3-1 to eventual finalists, Portland Timbers.

Portland's Argentine playmaker Sebastian Blanco lit up the first round with two outstanding goals against Minnesota United, and his side went on to knock out the Rapids in dramatic fashion thanks to a last-minute winner from Larrys Mabiala.

The early elimination of the top sides from each conference demonstrated the potential unpredictability of the play-offs. The side finishing top of the overall standings at the end of the regular season have only lifted the MLS Cup in seven of the league's 26 seasons. In the past ten years, only one conference table-topper has reached the MLS Cup final: 2017 winners, Toronto FC.

Real Salt Lake epitomised the spirit of the play-offs in 2021 and, having scraped into the post-season on Decision Day, they went on to knock out Western heavyweights Seattle Sounders and Sporting Kansas City against the odds.

The Timbers halted RSL's flow in the Western Conference decider, which meant the MLS Cup final would be played at Portland's impressive Providence Park stadium due to them having accumulated the most regular-season points of the remaining teams.

This prevented the prospect of the final being played at a baseball park — NYCFC's current home, Yankee Stadium.

City had one more hurdle to clear to reach this final. Callens found the net again in the Eastern Conference decider against Philadelphia Union, but this time it was in his own goal. It wasn't to matter though, as strikes from Maxi Moralez and Talles Magno were enough to defeat a depleted Union side.

Despite finishing eighth overall in the regular season, and fourth in the Eastern Conference, anyone noticing New York City's underlying stats would have been unsurprised by their eventual triumph. Expected goals data (xG) takes into account the quality of chances a team creates and the quality of chances they concede at the other end. NYCFC finished the season as the team with the highest expected goal difference in the league.

> **Despite finishing eighth overall in the regular season, and fourth in the Eastern Conference, anyone noticing New York City's underlying stats would have been unsurprised by their eventual triumph**

Of course, the only things that matter at the end of the season are actual goals scored and actual points on the board, but there was at least an indication going into the MLS Cup play-offs that NYCFC had the tools to put together a good run.

In the final, City went ahead through Castellanos, only to concede an equaliser in the dying seconds of added time, scored by Felipe Mora.

Having had the cup taken from their grasp at the last moment, they had to pick themselves up for extra-time and the almost inevitable penalty shootout that ensued.

City goalkeeper Sean Johnson saved strongly from Portland's first two takers, Mora and Diego Valeri, and though a miss from Alfredo Morales kept the Timbers in it, Callens powered home the all-important fifth penalty for NYCFC, just as he had done against New England.

This one won the cup for his side, and Johnson's saves earned him the title of MLS Cup MVP for 2021 as New York became a successful soccer city once again.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Carles GIL
(New England Revolution)
The Spaniard was the creative force behind New England's Supporters' Shield win and was deservedly named the league's Most Valuable Player for 2021.

Revolution's playmaker... Carles Gil

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Robin FRASER (Colorado Rapids)
New England Revolution's Bruce Arena claimed the official award with good reason, but Colorado Rapids' unlikely rise to the top of the Western Conference standings against the odds was possible thanks to teamwork and steady performances from all of their players – a testament to Fraser's outstanding coaching.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Ryan GAULD
(Vancouver Whitecaps)
Joining the club in August, the Scottish attacking midfielder was key to Vancouver's mid-season turnaround under coach Vanni Sartini. Gauld's link-up play with another new signing, Brian White, transformed them from one of the worst teams in the league to one of the best.

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

At last for Atlas

Atlas finally end their long wait for a Liga MX title by winning Apertura

The good thing about curses is that, one day, they end. Even if, as in the case of Atlas, it takes 70 years for it to happen. After decades and decades of waiting, their fans were finally able to experience the joy of a title in Liga MX.

Atlas, one of the most traditional teams in Mexico, could be described as the Mexican equivalent of Everton: extremely popular in the city of Guadalajara where they are based, yet second in their footballing achievements to their local arch-rivals, Chivas, the second-most successful team in the country with 12 league titles.

Atlas' only previous title came way back in 1951, when the league was simply awarded to the team with the most points, rather than the modern system. The Red and Blacks achieved it by beating rivals Chivas 1-0 on the last day.

Since then, generations and generations of fans have had to watch with dismay as the team has never again managed to rise to the top of Mexican football. In fact, only once in all these years did they stay in the lead up to the title, in 1999, when an exciting generation of youngsters, led by Rafael Marquez and managed by Ricardo La Volpe, lost the final on penalties against the best team of their time, Toluca.

This season, however, had a different air. Two years ago, the team was bought by the controversial businessman Alejandro Irarragorri – who also owns another Liga MX team, Santos Laguna – and from that moment on, the squad was gradually strengthened until it became, if not one of the best in the league, good enough to challenge for a top-eight spot.

Nobody expected Atlas to be in a position to fight for the title, but little by little the team began to excite its fans. From the beginning of the season, the team was competitive, even in matches against the most powerful rivals in the league. And, to everyone's surprise, they finished the regular season second in the table, only behind America, the most successful team in Liga MX history.

Despite this, Atlas were by no means

Drought over... Atlas players celebrate with their supporters

Review

Battle...Atlas overcame Leon on penalties in the final

considered favourites for the final play-offs, which define the champions in Mexico. In fact, they were not even favourites for their quarter-final match against Monterrey. Although they finished the regular season way in down in ninth place, Monterrey had the most expensive squad in Mexican football, full of Latin American internationals, and just a few weeks earlier had won the CONCACAF Champions League.

But Atlas showed that they meant business by getting a valuable 0-0 draw in the first leg away from home. In the return leg, at the Jalisco Stadium, a controversial but fair penalty converted by their Argentine striker Julio Furch gave them the lead and, although Monterrey managed to equalise, the Red and Blacks managed to advance by virtue of their higher position in the table.

The semi-finals paired Atlas with UNAM Pumas, who had qualified in 11th place, but sprang a huge upset by beating America in the quarter-finals and arrived with only one defeat in their previous seven games.

Despite being superior throughout the series, Atlas were extremely close to another heartbreaking elimination. In another controversial decision, in the final minutes of the second leg, the referee decided not to whistle a penalty after a collision between the arm of defender Anderson Santamaria and the face of Pumas striker Juan Dinenno. With the scores again tied at 1-1, Pumas would have advanced to the final had they scored from the spot, but once again Atlas advanced thanks to their superior league performance.

Nobody expected Atlas to be in a position to fight for the title, but little by little the team began to excite its fans

With the team in the final, their long-suffering fans began to come out of their caves. Intellectuals and artists declared their love for the team, tinged with the fear of seeing their hearts break again. The most famous television commentator in the country, Enrique Bermudez, promised to paint his bald head with the team's crest if they won the title and, in general, the supporters of all the other teams (with the exception of Chivas of course) declared their sympathy for the Red and Blacks.

Fans celebrate..."70 years ago I saw you be a champion, today once again"

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Camilo VARGAS (Atlas)
Despite a couple of mistakes in the play-offs, the Colombia goalkeeper was instrumental in Atlas' title win. During the regular season, he helped the team concede just ten goals – a joint-league record – then saved two penalties in the final shootout against Leon.

Atlas legend... Diego Cocca

COACH OF THE YEAR
Diego COCCA (Atlas)
Team captain at the beginning of the century, Cocca cemented his status as an Atlas legend by coming back to lead the side to their first league title in 70 years. Former centre-back, his team mirrors the technical and combative style he had as a player.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Arturo ORTIZ (UNAM Pumas)
After spending almost all his career in the second tier, the 29-year-old centre-back was signed by Pumas to replace Italy-bound Johan Vasquez. He completely exceeded expectations and was instrumental in the team's surprise run to the semi-finals.

Their rivals in the final would be Leon, 2020 Apertura champions and one of the most successful teams of the last decade in Mexico. Again, Atlas would not be favourites, and again, they would end up prevailing in the most dramatic way possible.

The first leg was extremely exciting and ended 3-2 in favour of Leon, leaving everything to be defined at the Jalisco Stadium. There, Atlas were far superior, although they could only score one goal, a header from their captain, Aldo Rocha. The aggregate draw took the game to penalties, where, finally, Furch scored the winning goal and ended the longest curse in Mexican soccer, to the incredulity and joy of millions of fans who had already resigned themselves to never watching their team lift the league trophy in their lifetime.

Arab Cup

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Review

Algeria triumph in Qatar

Fennec Foxes victorious in World Cup warm-up event

The extra-time goals from Amir Sayoud and Yacine Brahimi that crowned Algeria first-time Arab Cup winners may remain footnotes in football's history books. That's not to belittle the tenth edition of a tournament, outside the FIFA calendar, that enchanted with incessant last-minute drama and great goals. It enjoyed huge interest from across the region and led to wild celebrations on Algiers' 1er Mai square.

In the final against Tunisia, Brahimi's championship-winning goal, the last kick of the match, was a fitting end to a tournament full of slow burners. In the quarter-finals, the African champions eliminated Morocco on penalties while Egypt needed two extra-time goals against Jordan.

The stoppage-time drama in the semi-finals was as compelling as it was bizarre: Tunisia got a last-gasp winner in the dying seconds through an own-goal by the Egyptian captain Amr El Solia, while Algeria's victory over the hosts was even more chaotic. Polish referee Szymon Marciniak allowed for 19 minutes of stoppage-time in total, during which Qatar equalised to make it 1-1, before Youcef Belaili – a striker that, going into the tournament, played his club football for Qatar SC – struck the winner from a rebounded penalty with 107 minutes on the clock.

Against the well-organised Algerians, the host nation failed to replicate the swashbuckling attacks that demolished the United Arab Emirates 5-0 in the quarter-finals in a match that drew 63,439 spectators – the single highest attendance ever for a sporting event in Qatar. The country's third-place finish was satisfactory but hardly convincing.

Ever since Qatar's maiden Asian Cup win in 2019, the pedigree of the World Cup hosts has been questioned. Qatar adopted the best-practice recruitment and development model of the club game to build a national team at the famed Aspire academy, but having participated in competitions in four of FIFA's six regions, the performances have often fallen short.

Winners...jubilant Algeria celebrate

Heartbreak...Tunisia's late semi-final winner loops over Egypt goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy

The team of Felix Sanchez is closely knit but lacks depth and when striker Almoez Ali, inconsistent throughout the Arab Cup, fades, too much of the burden falls on his partner Akram Afif.

In the end, the hosts were Asia's sole representatives in the last four in a tournament that was dominated by North Africa. Although shorn of their European-based players, the Maghreb participants and Egypt overpowered their Asian opponents through intensity, physicality, skill and experience, stirring fierce emotions in the stand where supporters often ignited the storied, local rivalries. More than half a million fans attended the 32 matches across six stadiums, all World Cup venues.

The Arab Cup offered a glimpse of the first World Cup in the Middle East: a compact tournament embedded in the local culture. FIFA president Gianni Infantino said that the competition "unites the Arab world". Last staged in 2012, the tournament has more merit and depth than the smaller, regional Gulf Cup, but apart from Saudi Arabia and the UAE only a few other countries on the Arabian Peninsula have the means to stage an international 16-team tournament.

In reality, FIFA, having dropped the Confederations Cup, took charge of the Arab Cup to stage a final, major test event in Qatar before the World Cup, a tournament that the world federation, amid a storm of outrage and accusations of corruption, awarded to the country in 2010.

Ever since, the Qatari capital has seen a decade of super-acceleration, spending an estimated $220 billion on infrastructure and World Cup venues, with its West Bay skyline reaching ever more for the sky. Doha has also staged a slate of international sporting events, including the 2015 Handball World Cup, the 2019 IAAF World Championships and the 2019 Club World Cup. Qatar's operational readiness is not in doubt. They staged the Arab Cup without major incident and in a bio-secure way, offering hope for a normal World Cup.

Nothing has been left to chance. The World Cup is a larger-than-life soft power and nation-building project for Qatar, a dream that is sustained by the relentless labour of migrant workers. The uncomfortable questions over Qatar's human rights record endure. In February, *The Guardian* reported that 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since 2010, with 37 deaths linked to the construction of World Cup stadiums. These numbers invited new scrutiny on Qatar.

The Arab Cup was not without problems either. Major worries remain over labour reform, press freedom and the opaque legal system. In the last month, Qatari authorities arrested three Norwegian journalists, while Abdullah Ibhais – a former media manager for the local organising committee, who raised concerns over migrant workers – was convicted to three years in prison on charges of corruption. Ibhais has always denied any wrongdoing.

Ultimately, the legacy of Qatar's World Cup will be defined by its progress off the field, rather than the team that triumphs at the end of the 28-day extravaganza.

The 2021 Arab Cup offered a glimpse of the first World Cup in the Middle East: a compact tournament embedded in the local culture

Late drama... Qatar's Mohammed Muntari celebrates his stoppage-time goal v Algeria

Match winner... Yacine Brahimi lifts the Golden Ball award after netting in the final

Singapore

JOHN DUERDEN

Thailand return to top of Southeast Asia

Mano Polking's side lift their third Suzuki Cup in the last four editions

The first day of 2022 saw Thailand lift the AFF Suzuki Cup, the ten-team biennial tournament held in Singapore, to return to the top of Southeast Asian football. This 13th edition, taking place 25 years after the first one in 1996, should have taken place in 2020, but it was worth the wait for fans in this football-loving region of 650 million.

The boys from Bangkok lifted the trophy for the sixth time, defeating Indonesia 6-2 on aggregate in the two-legged final. Many thought Thailand would meet defending champions Vietnam in the last game but that clash came in the last four instead. Vietnam kept a clean sheet in five of the six games in the competition, but two goals in the first leg of their semi-final gave Thailand the advantage and that was all the War Elephants needed.

Champions... Thailand players celebrate a goal in the final

Review

Semi-finals...Vietnam watch on as Thailand's Chanathip Songkrasin takes a penalty

Runners-up...Young Player of the Tournament Pratama Arhan of Indonesia

Both strikes came from Chanathip Songkrasin and the diminutive playmaker was one of the stars for Thailand. With four goals, "Messi Jay" finished as joint-top scorer alongside Teerasil Dangda, another legend and one of the three Thais to go on trial with Manchester City back in 2007. Mano Polking, the Brazilian-German coach, drew on his seven years working in the Thai Premier League – the best league in the region – to lead the team to a deserved win.

There was plenty to talk about in an incident-packed tournament, but ultimately it ended with the familiar sight of Thai hands on the trophy

After Vietnam, came Indonesia in the final, for some reason still two-legged despite taking place in a neutral venue (traditionally, the group stage is held in one or two countries with the knockout rounds then taking place on a home and away basis). Thailand took the first leg 4-0 to make the return match, which ended 2-2, almost immaterial.

A sixth title for the talented Thais was not a surprise but Indonesia's sixth final defeat was also welcomed at home. This underachieving nation of almost 300 million loves football – possibly more than any other in Asia – but has underachieved partly thanks to off-field issues such as political interference, corruption and other shenanigans. Coach Shin Tae-yong, who led South Korea at the 2018 World Cup, took a young team to Singapore and they performed well. A 4-1 win over bitter rivals Malaysia in the group stage will live long in the memory.

The same is true of the thrilling 5-3 aggregate victory against Singapore in the semi-final. The first leg ended 1-1 but the second was a belter. Indonesia took an early lead but, despite being reduced to ten men, Singapore equalised just before the break. Then, despite being shown a second red midway through the second half, Singapore took the lead with 16 minutes remaining. They almost held out but a late Indonesia equaliser took the game into extra-time when they inevitably won, though there was still time for the Lions to go down to eight players.

It was an epic way to bow out. Singapore may have been champions four times but they've failed to progress past the group stage on the last three occasions. Under Japanese coach Tatsuma Yoshida they played some good stuff on the way to the last four to give their fans something to cheer about.

Malaysia had targeted a place in the final but that was always optimistic. In beating Laos and Cambodia, but losing heavily to Indonesia and Vietnam, the Tigers showed that they are, at present, a mid-ranking regional team even if that may be hard for some to accept.

Vietnam, the only Southeast Asian team in the final round of qualification for the 2022 World Cup, were majorly disappointed to exit at the semi-final stage even if there was little to choose between them and Thailand. There is a feeling in some quarters that the Golden Stars, much-improved and harder to beat in recent years as they have gone on a wonderful journey with coach Park Hang-seo, have perhaps gone as far as possible under the popular South Korean coach.

Of the others, the Philippines won two group games and lost two, narrowly to Thailand and Singapore, a creditable performance for a team with little football under their belts in recent months. The same can be said of Myanmar, who also have the added complication of political instability to deal with. Cambodia have shown flashes in the past to suggest they could beat the region's powerhouses and while the Angkor Warriors were largely competitive and entertaining under Keisuke Honda, they still have some way to go.

The additions of VAR and COVID meant that there was plenty more to talk about in an incident-packed tournament, but ultimately the AFF Suzuki Cup ended with the familiar sight of Thai hands on the trophy.

Winners...Thailand players and their coach Mano Polking celebrate with the trophy

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Champions... Kawasaki Frontale captain Shogo Taniguchi lifts the trophy

Review

Kawasaki lead from the front

Toru Oniki's side seal back-to-back J.League titles

Kawasaki Frontale cemented their recent domination of Japanese football by securing their fourth J.League title in five years with four matches left to play, the same as last year. They sped out from the blocks with five straight wins, set a new J.League record of 25 games without defeat from the start of the season, and finished 13 points clear of their nearest rivals, Yokohama F. Marinos.

Even so, there was a difficult period in August when key players left the club, Kawasaki stumbled, and Yokohama reduced the gap to a single point.

"To be honest, it was a relief," said manager Toru Oniki after Kawasaki clinched the title with a gritty 1-1 draw at home to Urawa Red Diamonds. "We had a lot of difficult matches this season but, all through, the players played with great patience. We have kept on growing through winning."

This year's first division was played with 20 clubs – two more than usual – over a 38-game season, because no teams were relegated in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. For the historians, though, Kawasaki's 85 points from 34 matches at the point of clinching the title was already two more than last year's then-record 83 points from 34 games. The goals didn't come so freely this season – 81 compared to 88 last year – but the defence instead was now the best in the division with only 28 conceded.

Kawasaki's short, mid-season slump followed the summer transfers of two rising national team stars: striker Kaoru Mitoma to Brighton & Hove Albion (now on loan at Royal Union Saint-Gilloise), and midfielder Ao Tanaka to Fortuna Dusseldorf. Kawasaki dropped several points in draws, lost 1-0 to Avispa Fukuoka – their only J.League defeat before clinching the title – and were knocked out on penalties by Ulsan

Full house...Kawasaki fans during the title-sealing draw with Urawa Red Diamonds

Hyundai in the last 16 of the Asian Champions League.

But adjustments were made. Brazilian forward Marcinho arrived from Chinese club Chongqing Liangjiang Athletic, and Yokohoma stumbled while Kawasaki romped on.

Several younger players also stepped up to stamp their influence on the team, including three outstanding midfielders: 24-year-old Reo Hatate, 23-year-old Kento Tachibanada, and 26-year-old dead-ball specialist and chance maker, Yasuto Wakizaka.

This year's first division was played with 20 clubs – two more than usual – over a 38-game season, because no teams were relegated in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic

Seven Kawasaki players were named in the J.League's Best XI: Jesiel, Shogo Taniguchi, Miki Yamane, Akihiro Ienaga, Wakizaka, Hatate and joint-top scorer and Player of the Year Leandro Damiao. They were joined by Mitchell Langerak and Sho Inagaki (Nagoya Grampus), Andres Iniesta (Vissel Kobe), and Daizen Maeda (Yokohama F. Marinos).

Gamba Osaka, the 2020 league and Emperor's Cup runners-up, were highly fancied at the start of the season, but their campaign was halted from the outset by a COVID cluster. Gamba were forced to sit out the whole of March, and never recovered their rhythm of the previous season.

Instead, the main early pretenders to Kawasaki's title were Nagoya Grampus and Sagan Tosu until Yokohama F. Marinos overhauled them both in the summer.

Nagoya reinforced the attack with the signing of Yoichiro Kakitani, while wide players Mateus and Yuki Soma performed magnificently on the counter-attack, but again it was Nagoya's solid defending that made them especially hard to beat. Nagoya's challenge fizzled out with consecutive 4-0 and 3-2 defeats to Kawasaki in late April and early May, but they kept a new J.League record of 21 clean sheets over the season and won the League Cup final 2-0 against Cerezo Osaka in October.

Tosu, too, shone defensively, and didn't concede a single goal for the first 585 minutes of the campaign. At 17 years six months and ten days, defender Shinya Nakano set a new first division record on the opening day of the new season as the youngest player ever to make a starting line-up, beating Junichi Inamoto's old record by 15 days, and carried on as a regular starter all season.

Conversely, the stand-out player for Yokohama F. Marinos this year, where Kevin Muscat took over in the summer after Ange Postecoglou's departure for Celtic, was swift-footed Daizen Maeda, who scored with equal facility with his left foot, right foot and head to wind up as joint-top scorer with Leandro Damiao on 23 goals. The two also shared the honours in a showdown between the J.League's two top clubs on the final day of the season, scoring a goal apiece in a 1-1 draw.

Elsewhere, World Cup veteran and three-time J.League top scorer Yoshito Okubo, now 39 and back at his first club, Cerezo Osaka, also hit the ground running with five goals in their first five matches. Okubo extended his tally to 191 goals at the top of the first division's all-time goalscoring rankings before retiring at the end of the season.

Four clubs – Oita Trinita (Emperor's Cup runners-up after losing 2-1 to Urawa Reds in the final), Yokohama FC, Vegalta Sendai and Tokushima Vortis – were relegated and two – Jubilo Iwata and Kyoto Sanga – promoted to bring the first division back to 18 clubs next year.

Party time...Jesiel opens the scoring against Urawa Reds

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Leandro DAMIAO
(Kawasaki Frontale)
The former Internacional and Brazil striker was on fire all year, and ended as joint-top scorer with Yokohama F. Marinos' Daizen Maeda on 23 goals.

Prolific... Leandro Damiao

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Toru ONIKI (Kawasaki Frontale)
Kawasaki's fourth league title in five years makes 47-year-old coach Toru Oniki the J.League's most crowned manager ever.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
Ryotaro ARAKI (Kashima Antlers)
Acclaimed for his fine ball skills, positioning and timing, 19-year-old Araki scored ten goals this year in the No.13 shirt previously worn by Antlers legends Atsushi Yanagisawa and Shinzo Koroki.

South Korea

JOHN DUERDEN

Same old story

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors win their fifth title in a row – and seventh in eight seasons – after another late collapse by Ulsan Hyundai

The 2021 K-League season ended in a familiar fashion: Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors lifted the trophy, while second-placed Ulsan Hyundai were left shaking their heads in wonderment at just how they didn't win. It was the fifth time in succession that Jeonbuk were South Korean champions and the third time that Ulsan, becoming known as serial chokers, threw it away at the end.

With four games of the season left, the two teams met with Ulsan first, Jeonbuk second and third out of the running. Heading into the 95th minute it was 2-2 and the Tigers were staying in pole position, before Russian striker Stanislav Iljutcenko converted a delightful cross from Takahiro Kunimoto with a diving header to win the game and, in the end, the league.

It was a bitter pill for Ulsan to swallow as they ended up two points behind Jeonbuk in the final standings. In 2019, a draw with Pohang Steelers on the final day would have been enough for the title but the Tigers lost 4-1. In 2020, they were on top in the penultimate round

Winners... Han Kyo-won of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

All-Korean clash... Jeonbuk and Ulsan also met in the AFC Champions League

but lost to Jeonbuk and then lost the league. This time around, most observers believe Ulsan to be the best team, a feeling reinforced as four of their players were named in the K-League Team of the Season, compared to one from Jeonbuk: central defender Hong Jeong-ho, who was named the league's MVP.

"In many aspects, I think we had the best performance in the league this year," Ulsan coach Hong Myung-bo said after the final game of the season, a 2-0 win over Daegu FC who finished 19 points behind in third. "I am proud of having coached these players this season. We overcame so much adversity to get to this point, and I am pleased that we closed out the season with a win at home."

International commitments meant that Ulsan had a tough start and end to the year due to playing in the FIFA Club World Cup in February in Qatar and then reaching the semi-final of the 2021 AFC Champions League (beating Jeonbuk along the way) only to lose to another Korean team Pohang Steelers in a penalty shootout.

"We're bound to experience failures along the way, and it's all part of the process," Hong said. "I'll try to build an even better team for next year."

Jeonbuk, who had been cup specialists until 2009 when they won their first K-League title, are celebrating their ninth championship victory (it would have been their tenth had they not been hit with a nine-point deduction back in 2016 due to a bribery scandal). Jeonbuk simply have that winning mentality.

"We didn't get this championship DNA overnight," Jeonbuk coach Kim Sang-sik said. "These players know how to win, because they've done it so often," Kim said. "They understand what it takes to win championships and how they should play to make it happen."

Losing 2020 MVP midfielder Son Jun-ho to China, record K-League goalscorer Lee Dong-gook to retirement and forward Cho Gue-song to military duty, presented challenges that were overcome. "There has not been an easy moment the whole season," added Kim. "But in the end, we were able to make history in front of our fans."

> "We didn't get this championship DNA overnight. These players know how to win, because they've done it so often"
>
> Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors coach Kim Sang-sik

With the top two so far ahead, attention turned to the relegation battle. When the 12-team league split into two groups of six with five of the 38 games remaining, there were some historic names down there.

Pohang Steelers, Seongnam FC and FC Seoul have 18 league titles between them, as well as five Asian championships, but all finished in the bottom half. Gwangju FC finished last and dropped into K2 to be replaced by army team Gimcheon Sangmu.

Then there was the relegation play-off between the team that finished second-bottom in the top tier, Gangwon FC, and the team that finished second top in the second tier, Daejeon Hana Citizen. Daejeon, looking for a return to the top flight for the first time since 2015, took the first leg 1-0 but were swept aside 4-1 in the second leg and Gangwon stay where they are.

The major surprise came in the FA Cup. Second division Jeonnam Dragons lost the first leg of the final 1-0 at home to Daegu FC but took the trophy on away goals after a 4-3 second-leg triumph. The Dragons will become the first team from South Korea's second tier to compete in the AFC Champions League.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE YEAR
JOO Min-kyu (Jeju United)
At the age of 31, the striker is not going to get that international debut, but he has scored goals wherever he has been. His eight goals helped Jeju United to promotion last season but, this time around, his 22 strikes took the islanders into fourth spot.

MANAGER OF THE YEAR
KIM Do-kyuk (Suwon FC)
Suwon FC had spent only one season in the top tier before but, under coach Kim, managed to finish fifth – one place above Suwon Bluewings, the traditional power in the city just south of Seoul.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
SEOL Young-woo (Ulsan Hyundai)
The 23-year-old left-back played a major role in Ulsan's push for the title. Calm in the tackle and in possession, it was no surprise when he was named Young Player of the Year. A senior international debut for the Taegeuk Warriors can't be too far away.

Youngster...Seol Young-woo

Champions...Jeonbuk lift the league trophy

Credit: hyundai-motorsfc.com

New Zealand

EMANUELE GIULIANELLI

COVID derails inaugural NZNL season

Miramar Rangers win the newly-formed New Zealand National League trophy after heavily disrupted season

Celebrations... Miramar Rangers

The truly troubled 2021 season of football in New Zealand came to an end in Wellington on December 12, as Miramar Rangers defeated Wellington Olympic 7-2 in the Grand Final of the South Central Series. New Zealand Football (NZF) had plans for this to be an historic season and, in many ways, it was – but not as they intended.

2021 was the New Zealand National League's first-ever season, created as the successor to the New Zealand Football Championship. The competition is separated into two stages, with teams competing in regional leagues to qualify for the Championship Phase. Four teams come from the Northern League, three from the Central League and two from the Southern League.

Those nine sides are joined by Wellington Phoenix Reserves, who automatically receive a spot each year. Phoenix's first team compete in the A-League Men, the top tier of Australian football. After being founded in 2007, they obtained a licence to play in the A-League, replacing New Zealand Knights, and have taken part in every edition since.

But, as with so many other things, the COVID-19 pandemic turned the plans for the new competition upside down.

In September, the alert level for Auckland was extended to four, and NZF terminated the remaining Northern League season and cancelled any yet to

Final clash... Wellington Olympic and Miramar players compete for the ball

be played fixtures. Auckland City were comfortably in front, as they had been so often in recent seasons.

The Championship Phase should be split into two regional groups – the Central League and Southern League – with the top two sides from each qualifying for a play-off semi-final before the Grand Final. But the new alert level didn't allow Auckland or Waikato teams to play in the competition, so NZF decided to play a one-off interregional tournament instead: the National League South Central Series.

As with so many other things, the COVID-19 pandemic turned the plans upside down

With the four would-be qualifiers from the Northern League excluded, five sides from the Central and Southern leagues, plus Wellington Phoenix Reserves, all played each other once. After five matches, Miramar Rangers and Wellington Olympic occupied the top two spots, and qualified for the Grand Final.

Both sides had qualified for the Championship Phase from the Central League; Wellington Olympic dominated, winning 15 out of their 18 games and losing only once, while Miramar Rangers were five points behind on 42, edging out Lower Hutt City by just one point.

The Grand Final was their fourth meeting of 2021, and Olympic boasted the superior record having beaten Miramar 1-0 in August, with the other two fixtures ending in draws (0-0 and 4-4).

Yet Miramar got their revenge in style, dismantling their opponents with a 7-2 win at the Jerry Collins Stadium in Wellington. Striker Ollie Whyte scored two of the seven goals, taking his tally in the Championship Phase to seven, thereby securing the Golden Boot.

While Miramar players celebrate, it was not a totally satisfying end to a very confused and troubled season. NZF also confirmed that the South Central Series would not have any bearing on OFC Champions League qualification, which will have to be separately discussed with the OFC, while the New Zealand national cup, usually disputed in September, was postponed until 2022.

Miramar Rangers coach...Scott Hales

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Pieter-Taco BIEREMA
(Selwyn United)
The Dutch-born goalkeeper is the symbol of the resurgent Selwyn United. One year ago, at the Foster Park of Rolleston, they went very close to relegation. In the hands of shot-stopper Pieter-Taco Bierema they have found their new ambitions.

Player of the Year...Bierema

COACH OF THE SEASON
Scott HALES (Miramar Rangers)
Hales served as assistant to Jose Figueira for three years, but when Figueira moved to Auckland City in 2019, Hales stepped up too as Miramar Rangers head coach. He achieved the South Central series win just before his 40th birthday.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Oskar VAN HATTUM
(Wellington Phoenix Reserves)
Born in 2002, Van Hattum was the main striker of New Zealand's U17s. Following his four goals and top performances during the South Central Series, he was called up by Wellington Phoenix's main side in Australia's A-League Men.

	LEAGUE CHAMPIONS	TOP SCORER	BEST OF THE REST
Belarus PREMIER LEAGUE *by Nick Bidwell*	**Shakhtyor Soligorsk**, a club from a small town 120km south of Minsk, earned their second consecutive league title with a healthy ten-point cushion over long-standing national heavyweights BATE Borisov. Shakhtyor lost just three games all season.	Gambia striker **Dembo Darboe** was irrepressible throughout the campaign, notching 19 goals. The 23-year-old scored the Goal of the Season versus Slavia Mozyr, bursting forward from deep in his own half before coolly slotting home.	Only a top-flight side since 2019, Rukh Brest continued to shock by finishing fifth. Their two front men Denis Laptev and Artem Kontsevoy were key to their success. Rukh used to be a satellite club to hometown big brothers Dinamo Brest.
Estonia MEISTRILIIGA *by Nick Bidwell*	The title race had the perfect conclusion for suspense addicts, with Tallinn rivals **FC Levadia** and Flora battling it for the spoils on the final weekend. A 2-2 draw was enough to give Levadia their first national league crown in six years.	Much-travelled Estonian striker **Henri Anier** topped the scoring charts with 26 goals for third-placed Paide Linnameeskond, including three hat-tricks. The 30-year-old has played in Norway, Sweden, Scotland, Germany, Finland, South Korea and Netherlands.	The vagaries of the 2021 calendar had title rivals Levadia and Flora meeting twice in the last two weeks of the campaign. In the penultimate round, Flora secured a sensational 5-1 win at Levadia, a result which cut the latter's lead at the summit to one point.
Faroe Islands PREMIER LEAGUE *by Nick Bidwell*	**KI** from Klaksvik clinched their second Faroese title in the last three years. KI had matters in hand from gun to tape, sealing the deal with three rounds to play and only losing once (a dead rubber at the end of the season).	No one could match the substantial goal-haul of Danish hitman **Mikkel Dahl** (27 goals) whose clinical finishing was instrumental to HB's runner-up prize. One of the most prolific strikers in Europe in the 2021 calendar year.	This was a year of multiple national league records for champions KI: most goals scored in a season (99), fewest goals against (12), most clean sheets (18) and best goal difference in a season (+87). Utter domination.
Finland VEIKKAUSLIIGA *by Nick Bidwell*	**HJK** won their 31st title and have now claimed ten of the last 13 Finnish Championships. Their latest was appropriately clinched with a 1-1 draw at nearest rivals KuPS. Full marks to HJK coach Toni Koskela, the best manager in the country.	**Benjamin Kallman**, a Finnish international forward with Inter Turku, and SJK's Cameroonian striker **Ariel Ngueukam** could not be separated in the finishing stakes, each totalling 14 goals.	Back in the top flight for the first time in five years, KTP, from the southern port city of Kotka – where Finnish superstar Teemu Pukki began his career – spent the entire season sprawled on the canvas, only winning two of their 27 league encounters.
Georgia EROVNULI LIGA *by Nick Bidwell*	**Dinamo Batumi** shook up the Georgian football hierarchy by claiming their first-ever domestic title. They thoroughly deserved their moment in the sun, picking up 11 points out of 12 in their four head-to-heads against their closest rivals, Dinamo Tbilisi.	In his first season leading the line for Dinamo Tbilisi, Serbian centre-forward **Zoran Marusic** more than paid his way, netting 16 times in a successful quest for the Golden Boot. Early in his career, he played as a defensive midfielder or stopper.	The country's most prestigious club by some distance, Dinamo Tbilisi recorded their 700th win in the Georgian top flight thanks to a 3-2 victory over capital city foes Lokomotiv on the final weekend of the season.
Iceland URVALSDEILD *by Nick Bidwell*	Reykjavik outfit **Vikingur** earned their first league title in 30 years, clinching it with a 2-0 victory over capital city rivals Leiknir on the final weekend. Breidablik, who ran them close, were undone by a shock loss to FH on the penultimate matchday.	Tall Danish centre-forward **Nicolaj Hansen** proved Vikingur's ace in the hole, amassing 16 top-flight goals. He was particularly deadly in the opening two months of the season; his 13-goal hot streak worth its weight in gold.	IA from Akranes, a club with a magnificent history, managed to avoid the drop right at the death. Two down at Keflavik with less than 30 minutes remaining, they pulled off a miraculous life-saving win thanks to three goals in seven minutes.

	LEAGUE CHAMPIONS	TOP SCORER	BEST OF THE REST
Kazakhstan PREMIER LEAGUE *by Nick Bidwell*	**Tobol** barely put a foot wrong, losing just once en route to their first title since 2010. Even when coach Grigori Babayan was lured away by CSKA Moscow in mid-campaign, Tobol – now with Alexander Moksalenko in charge – never missed a beat.	**Marin Tomasov**, ostensibly a right-winger but forever making things happen in the red zone, cracked in 17 goals for runners-up Astana. The bigger the game, the better the Croat seemed to perform.	Astana coach Andrei Tikhonov was banned for two years on a disrepute charge. Angry with the refereeing in a 1-0 loss to Kairat on the penultimate week of the season, Tikhonov ordered his players to leave the pitch in protest.
Latvia VIRSLIGA *by Nick Bidwell*	Displaying strong nerves on the final weekend of the season, **Rigas FS** secured the league crown with a 2-0 victory over Daugavpils. RFS, national champions for the first time, built their triumph on two long unbeaten streaks each straddling 13 games.	Mid-table Spartaks Jumala appear to have unearthed a real jewel in the shape of 19-year-old Cameroon striker **Leonel Wamba**. He accumulated 14 goals in all, many of them via his head.	Fresh from being handed a seven-year fraud/corruption ban by UEFA, cash-strapped Ventspils withdrew from the league in June, while another match-fixing scandal saw Noah Jurmala pull out a month later.
Lithuania A LYGA *by Nick Bidwell*	For the second consecutive season, the Green and White stripes of **Zalgiris** took the honours. The Vilnius club were superior in virtually every way: consistency, goal power, defensive strength and teamwork.	Much of Zalgiris' firepower was supplied by French left-winger **Hugo Videmont**, who achieved the excellent strike-rate of 17 goals in 34 games. Previously with Clermont in France, Poland's Wisla Krakow and Tubize in Belgium.	Bearing in mind that they used three head coaches (Sergei Gurenko, Valdas Trakys and Miguel Moreira) in the 2021 campaign, Riteriai did extremely well to finish in mid-table, well away from the relegation zone.
Norway ELITESERIEN *by Nick Bidwell*	**Bodo/Glimt**, superbly led by coach Kjetil Knutsen, claimed the title for the second year in as row. With their high energy, attacking intent, defensive solidity and youthful endeavour, they are reaping huge dividends for audacious long-term planning.	After an epic head-to-head with Lillestrom front man Thomas Lehne Olsen, Molde marksman extraordinaire **Ohi Omoijuanfo** finally put himself over the top on the final weekend of the season, ending 2021 with 27 goals in 28 games.	Newly-promoted Lillestrom enjoyed a dream campaign, finishing fourth. Coach Geir Bakke deserves praise a plenty for turning a team of loanees, free transfers and homegrown youngsters into a superb competitive unit.
Republic Of Ireland PREMIER DIVISION *by Sean Creedon*	**Shamrock Rovers** won back-to-back league titles for the first time in ten years, clinching their 19th crown with no difficulty. Next season they could be even stronger with Irish international Jack Byrne returning from APOEL in Cyprus.	After a barren spell on loan from Dundalk to St Patrick's Athletic, **Georgie Kelly** bounced back to score 21 league goals. The 25-year-old Donegal-born striker's overall total was 25 goals in all competitions.	Bohemians needed to win the FAI Cup to get the final Europa Conference League spot, but lost the final on penalties to St Patrick's. The fourth European place now goes to Derry City, joining Rovers, St Pat's and Sligo.
Sweden ALLSVENSKAN *by Nick Bidwell*	The Sky Blues of **Malmo** successfully defended their league title in a close-run affair, only seeing off the strong challenge of AIK Solna on goal difference. Malmo were undoubtedly distracted by European commitments.	Norrkoping's Nigerian star **Samuel Adegbenro** was the pick of the crop with 17 goals. He posed a multi-dimensional threat, featuring at various times as a lone striker, winger or attacking midfielder.	Ostersund – the club where Brighton manager Graham Potter made a name for himself by reaching the Europa League knockout rounds in 2017-18 – could not avoid relegation, finishing rock bottom with only 14 points from a possible 90.

JANUARY 22-FEBRUARY 17

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

(All kick-off times, if stated, are BST)

Saturday January 22

FRANCE: Arch-rivals Lyon and Saint-Etienne go head to head at the Groupama Stadium.
GERMANY: Bundesliga top-four rivals Hoffenheim and Dortmund meet at the PreZero Arena.
ITALY: Milan host Juventus at the San Siro in Serie A.

Sunday January 23

CAMEROON: The AFCON 2021 last 16 begins, with the runners-up in Groups A and C meeting, before Group D's winners kick off at 8pm.
ENGLAND: Antonio Conte returns to Stamford Bridge as his Tottenham Hotspur side take on Chelsea.
NETHERLANDS: PSV host Ajax.

Monday January 24

CAMEROON: In AFCON, the winners of Group A are in action after the two runners-up from Groups B and F meet at 5pm.
PORTUGAL: The Portuguese League Cup semi-finals take place over the next two days.

Tuesday January 25

CAMEROON: The winners of both Group B and Group C are in action in the AFCON round of 16.

Wednesday January 26

CAMEROON: The AFCON round of 16 concludes, with the Group E winners facing the Group D runners-up, and top of Group F facing second in Group E.

Thursday January 27

ASIA: World Cup qualifiers continue, with China bidding to keep their hopes alive with a visit to Japan, while Saudi Arabia can move a step closer to booking their place if they beat Oman.
CONCACAF: Jamaica v Mexico is the standout fixture of the CONCACAF World Cup qualifiers.
SOUTH AMERICA: In World Cup qualifying, fourth-placed Colombia meet Peru, while Uruguay travel to Paraguay in their first game since the departure of Oscar Tabarez.

World Cup qualifying... South America

Friday January 28

ENGLAND: Huddersfield Town meet Stoke City in the Championship.

Saturday January 29

CAMEROON: AFCON's quarter-finals begin, with one game kicking off at 5pm and the other at 8pm.
FRANCE: The last 16 of the French Cup takes place.
PORTUGAL: The Portuguese League Cup final kicks off.
CONCACAF: Canada host USA at the top of the CONCACAF World Cup qualifying table.

Sunday January 30

CAMEROON: The other two AFCON quarter-finals take place.

Monday January 31

EUROPE: The January transfer window closes across Europe's top five leagues leagues at 11pm, with the exception of the Bundesliga (5pm) and Serie A (7pm).
SOUTH AMERICA: More crucial World Cup qualifiers take place. Brazil v Paraguay, Argentina v Colombia and Peru v Ecuador are the standout clashes.

Tuesday February 1

CONCACAF: Mexico and Panama, currently third and fourth in World Cup qualifying, face off.

Wednesday February 2

CAMEROON: The first AFCON semi-final kicks off in Douala.
SPAIN: The Copa del Rey quarter-finals begin.
PORTUGAL: The Portuguese transfer window closes.

Thursday February 3

CAMEROON: The second AFCON finalist is determined by the second semi-final.

Friday February 4

GERMANY: Hertha Berlin host Bochum in the Bundesliga.

Saturday February 5

ENGLAND: The fourth round of the FA Cup takes place across the course of the weekend.
GERMANY: Last season's Bundesliga runners-up RB Leipzig travel to Munich to face Bayern.
ITALY: The *Derby Della Madonnina* takes place between Inter and Milan.
SPAIN: Barcelona meet Atletico Madrid at the Nou Camp.
FRANCE: Ligue 1 champions Lille host Paris Saint-Germain.

Sunday February 6

CAMEROON: The final of AFCON 2021 takes place at the Olembe Stadium in Yaounde at 8pm, with the third-place play-off kicking off three hours earlier.
GERMANY: In another big game at the top of the Bundesliga, Dortmund host Leverkusen.
INDIA: The Women's Asian Cup final takes place in Navi Mumbai.

Tuesday February 8

FRANCE: The first two French Cup quarter-finals take place, with the other two taking place a day later.
TURKEY: The transfer window closes, giving Turkish sides an extra week of recruitment.

Wednesday February 9

ITALY: The Coppa Italia quarter-finals get underway.

Thursday February 10

ENGLAND: The midweek league action concludes with Wolves v Arsenal and Liverpool v Leicester.

Saturday February 12

ITALY: In another vital weekend at the top of Serie A, Atalanta face Juventus and Napoli host Inter.
PORTUGAL: The last two league champions, Porto and Sporting, meet at the Estadio do Dragao.

Sunday February 13

FRANCE: High-flying Rennes visit Paris to face leaders PSG.
ENGLAND: Four Premier League fixtures conclude with Leicester City v West Ham United.

Tuesday February 15

EUROPE: The Champions League last 16 begins with Paris Saint-Germain v Real Madrid and Sporting v Manchester City.

Wednesday February 16

EUROPE: The Champions League round of 16 continues with Red Bull Salzburg v Bayern Munich and Inter v Liverpool.

Thursday February 17

EUROPE: The first knockout rounds for both the Europa League and Europa Conference League begin, with Atalanta, Barcelona and Dortmund in action in the former, and Marseille, Celtic and Leicester involved in the latter.

Milan derby...*Derby Della Madonnina*

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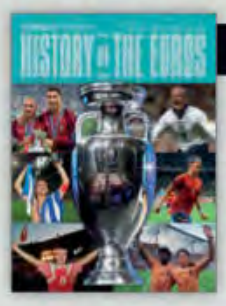

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Club Football

EUROPE

BELARUS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shakhtyor Soligorsk (C)	30	24	3	3	62	18	75
BATE Borisov	30	19	8	3	61	27	65
Dinamo Minsk	30	19	5	6	55	20	62
Gomel	30	17	8	5	57	23	59
Rukh Brest	30	16	10	4	52	28	58
Dinamo Brest	30	8	14	8	32	32	38
Vitebsk	30	9	10	11	37	41	37
Torpedo-BelAZ	30	10	6	14	38	43	36
Slutsk	30	9	8	13	36	44	35
Isloch	30	9	7	14	38	47	34
Neman Grodno	30	9	7	14	36	36	34
Minsk	30	8	9	13	32	52	33
Energetik-BGU Minsk	30	8	9	13	35	42	33
Slavia Mozyr*	30	8	8	14	42	50	32
Smorgon (R)	30	4	9	17	26	66	21
Sputnik (R)	30	2	1	27	12	82	7

Slavia Mozyr won relegation play-off v Krumkachy Minsk 1-0 on aggregate

ESTONIA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FCI Levadia (C)	32	25	3	4	84	38	78
Flora	32	23	8	1	90	23	77
Paide	32	18	8	6	66	35	62
Nomme Kalju	32	13	6	13	57	44	45
Legion	32	11	7	14	49	48	40
Trans	32	9	6	17	36	61	33

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kuressaare	30	10	4	16	39	47	34
Tulevik	30	9	3	18	39	62	30
Tammeka*	30	7	4	19	34	72	25
Vaprus (R)	30	5	3	22	24	88	18

Tammeka won relegation play-off v Tallinna Kalev 3-0 on aggregate

FAROE ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KI (C)	27	23	3	1	99	12	72
HB	27	19	4	4	87	22	61
Vikingur	27	18	6	3	59	27	60
NSI Runavik	27	14	5	8	54	38	47
B36 Torshavn	27	12	9	6	51	33	45
07 Vestur	27	8	4	15	36	74	28
EB/Streymur	27	7	4	16	28	53	25
B68 Toftir	27	7	4	16	33	66	25
IF	27	4	4	19	26	70	16
TB Tvoroyri (R)	27	0	3	24	17	95	3

FINLAND

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
HJK (C)	27	18	5	4	41	19	59
KuPS	27	17	7	3	46	20	58
SJK	27	14	6	7	45	34	48
Inter Turku	27	14	3	10	45	32	45
Ilves	27	11	3	13	29	34	36
HIFK	27	9	8	10	25	31	35

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lahti	27	10	10	7	35	30	40
Haka	27	10	5	12	30	29	35
Honka	27	9	6	12	38	37	33
Mariehamn	27	9	3	15	28	40	30
Oulu*	27	6	5	16	21	44	23
KTP (R)	27	2	5	20	25	58	11

Oulu won relegation play-off v RoPS 3-2 on aggregate

GEORGIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Batumi (C)	36	21	12	3	73	27	75
Dinamo Tbilisi	36	21	7	8	59	28	70
Dila Gori	36	17	10	9	48	35	61
Saburtalo Tbilisi	36	15	12	9	52	40	57
Locomotive Tbilisi	36	15	8	13	57	59	53
Telavi	36	12	8	16	35	53	44
Samgurali	36	9	14	13	34	46	41
Torpedo Kutaisi*	36	9	13	14	38	44	40
Shukura Kobuleti (R)**	36	5	12	19	28	49	27
Samtredia (R)	36	5	6	25	33	76	21

Torpedo Kutaisi won relegation play-off v Merani Martvili 3-2 on aggregate
**Shukura Kobuleti lost relegation play-off v Gagra 1-0 on aggregate*

ICELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vikingur Reykjavik (C)	22	14	6	2	38	21	48
Breidablik	22	15	2	5	55	21	47
KR	22	12	5	5	35	19	41
KA	22	12	4	6	36	20	40
Valur	22	12	3	7	37	26	39
FH	22	9	6	7	39	26	33
Stjarnan	22	6	4	12	24	36	22
Leiknir Reykjavik	22	6	4	12	18	32	22
IA	22	6	3	13	29	44	21
Keflavik	22	6	3	13	23	38	21
HK (R)	22	5	5	12	21	39	20
Fylkir (R)	22	3	7	12	18	51	16

KAZAKHSTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tobol (C)	26	18	7	1	54	18	61
Astana	26	17	6	3	53	25	57
Kairat	26	14	9	3	52	21	51
Kyzyl-Zhar	26	11	6	9	32	24	39
Ordabasy	26	10	8	8	36	35	38
Aktobe	26	9	6	11	35	40	33
Shakhter Karagandy	26	9	6	11	25	34	33
Kaspiy	26	8	8	10	35	35	32
Akzhayik	26	9	5	12	25	31	32
Taraz	26	7	8	11	27	34	29
Atyrau	26	7	7	12	25	40	28
Turan Turkistan	26	5	11	10	22	40	26
Kaisar (R)	26	4	7	15	24	44	19
Zhetysu (R)*	26	5	4	17	23	47	16

Zhetysu deducted three points

LATVIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rigas FS (C)	28	20	6	2	65	22	66
Valmiera	28	19	5	4	54	19	62
Liepaja	28	16	3	9	47	26	51
Riga	28	14	8	6	54	26	50
Spartaks Jurmala	28	11	2	15	40	41	35
Daugavpils	28	9	5	14	37	53	32
Metta/LU	28	5	5	18	33	55	20
Noah Jurmala*	28	1	0	27	8	96	3
Ventspils*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Noah Jurmala and Ventspils withdrew

LITHUANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zalgiris (C)	36	23	10	3	76	28	79
Suduva	36	21	7	8	64	33	70
Kauno Zalgiris	36	18	9	9	55	39	63
Panevezys	36	16	12	8	55	40	60
Hegelmann Litauen	36	14	11	11	53	38	53
Riteriai	36	10	16	10	49	37	46
Banga	36	10	6	20	40	71	36
Dzugas Telsiai	36	8	12	16	47	60	36
Dainava (R)*	36	9	11	16	39	56	35
Nevezis (R)	36	2	4	30	15	91	10

Dainava deducted three points

NORWAY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bodo/Glimt (C)	30	18	9	3	59	25	63
Molde	30	18	6	6	70	40	60
Viking	30	17	6	7	60	47	57
Lillestrom	30	14	7	9	49	40	49
Rosenborg	30	13	9	8	58	42	48
Kristiansund	30	14	4	12	41	46	46
Valerenga	30	11	12	7	46	37	45
Sarpsborg	30	11	6	13	39	44	39
Stromsgodset	30	9	9	12	43	43	36
Sandefjord	30	10	6	14	38	52	36
Haugesund	30	9	8	13	46	45	35
Tromso	30	8	11	11	33	44	35
Odd	30	8	9	13	44	58	33
Brann (R)*	30	5	11	14	38	55	26
Stabaek (R)	30	6	7	17	35	62	25
Mjondalen (R)	30	4	10	16	33	52	22

Brann lost relegation play-off v Jerv 8-7 on pens

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shamrock Rovers (C)	36	24	6	6	59	28	78
St Patrick's Athletic	36	18	8	10	56	42	62
Sligo Rovers	36	16	9	11	43	32	57
Derry City	36	14	12	10	49	42	54
Bohemians	36	14	10	12	60	46	52
Dundalk	36	13	9	14	44	46	48
Drogheda United	36	12	8	16	45	43	44
Finn Harps	36	11	11	14	44	52	44
Waterford (R)*	36	12	6	18	36	56	42
Longford Town (R)	36	2	9	25	22	71	15

Waterford lost relegation play-off v UCD 2-1

SWEDEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malmo (C)	30	17	8	5	58	30	59
AIK	30	18	5	7	45	25	59
Djurgarden	30	17	6	7	46	30	57
Elfsborg	30	17	4	9	51	35	55
Hammarby	30	15	8	7	54	41	53
Kalmar	30	13	8	9	41	39	47
Norrkoping	30	13	5	12	45	41	44
Goteborg	30	11	8	11	42	39	41
Mjallby	30	9	11	10	34	27	38
Varberg	30	9	10	11	35	38	37
Sirius	30	10	7	13	39	53	37
Hacken	30	9	9	12	46	46	36
Degerfors	30	10	4	16	34	51	34
Halmstad (R)*	30	6	14	10	21	26	32
Orebro (R)	30	4	6	20	23	58	18
Ostersund (R)	30	3	5	22	24	59	14

Halmstad lost relegation play-off v Helsingborg 3-2 on aggregate

SOUTH AMERICA

ARGENTINA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate (C)	25	16	6	3	53	19	54
Defensa y Justicia	25	13	8	4	43	24	47
Talleres	25	14	4	7	38	28	46
Boca Juniors	25	11	8	6	35	19	41
Velez Sarsfield	25	10	9	6	34	21	39
Estudiantes	25	10	9	6	43	31	39
Colon	25	11	6	8	26	31	39
Huracan	25	10	8	7	28	25	38
Independiente	25	10	8	7	27	24	38
Lanus	25	10	7	8	44	43	37
Gimnasia La Plata	25	9	9	7	27	28	36
Union	25	10	4	11	32	32	34
Aldosivi	25	10	3	12	29	39	33
Argentinos Juniors	25	8	8	9	26	25	32
Racing Club	25	8	8	9	24	23	32
Rosario Central	25	9	5	11	39	41	32
Godoy Cruz	25	8	7	10	35	33	31
Platense	25	7	10	8	36	36	31
Newell's Old Boys	25	7	7	11	24	32	28
San Lorenzo	25	7	6	12	23	33	27
Banfield	24	5	11	8	20	25	26
Central Cordoba	25	6	8	11	30	36	26
Patronato	25	5	10	10	23	35	25
Sarmiento	25	6	6	13	23	33	24
Atletico Tucuman	25	5	7	13	22	46	22
Arsenal	24	4	8	12	12	34	20

BOLIVIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente Petrolero (C)	30	20	5	5	59	33	65
Always Ready	30	19	7	4	66	31	64
The Strongest	30	19	6	5	57	24	63
Bolivar	30	16	8	6	63	29	56
Royal Pari	30	16	3	11	66	45	51
Oriente Petrolero	30	15	6	9	46	29	51
Jorge Wilstermann	30	15	4	11	64	48	49
Guabira	30	13	5	12	47	47	44
Atletico Palmaflor	30	11	7	12	42	45	40
Nacional Potosi	30	10	9	11	45	46	39
Santa Cruz	30	11	5	14	39	47	38
Aurora	30	9	6	15	40	51	33
Tomayapo	30	9	5	16	28	45	32
Blooming	30	7	5	18	34	56	26
Real Potosi (R)*	30	7	4	19	30	63	25
San Jose (R)	30	0	1	29	9	96	11

Real Potosi lost relegation play-off v Club Universitario 4-1 on aggregate

BRAZIL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Mineiro (C)	38	26	6	6	67	34	84
Flamengo	38	21	8	9	69	36	71
Palmeiras	38	20	6	12	58	43	66
Fortaleza	38	17	7	14	44	45	58
Corinthians	38	15	12	11	40	36	57
RB Bragantino	38	14	14	10	55	46	56
Fluminense	38	15	9	14	38	38	54
America Mineiro	38	13	14	11	41	37	53
Atletico Goianiense	38	13	14	11	33	36	53
Santos	38	12	14	12	35	40	50
Ceara	38	11	17	10	39	38	50
Internacional	38	12	12	14	44	42	48
Sao Paulo	38	11	15	12	31	39	48
Athletico Paranaense	38	13	8	17	41	45	47
Cuiaba	38	10	17	11	34	37	47
Juventude	38	11	13	14	36	44	46
Gremio (R)	38	12	7	19	44	51	43
Bahia (R)	38	11	10	17	42	51	43
Sport Recife (R)	38	9	11	18	24	37	38
Chapecoense (R)	38	1	12	25	27	67	15

CHILE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universidad Catolica (C)	32	22	2	8	65	34	68
Colo Colo	32	19	5	8	49	26	62
Audax Italiano	32	14	12	6	39	31	54
Union La Calera	32	15	6	11	41	40	51
Union Espanola	32	15	3	14	48	50	48
Deportivo Antofagasta	32	12	11	9	34	36	47
Nublense	32	11	11	10	49	37	44
Palestino	32	11	8	13	48	50	41
Cobresal	32	11	7	14	40	39	40
Deportes La Serena	32	9	12	11	40	42	39
Universidad de Chile	32	10	9	13	34	37	39
Everton	32	10	9	13	29	35	39
O'Higgins	32	9	11	12	31	41	38
Melipilla (R)*	32	10	8	14	39	51	38
Curico Unido	32	8	13	11	37	39	37
Huachipato*	32	8	13	11	36	41	37
Santiago Wanderers (R)	32	5	6	21	24	54	21

Melipilla were expelled, so Huachipato entered relegation play-offs instead of Curico Unido

COLOMBIA

Finalizacion

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Nacional*	20	12	6	2	32	13	42
Millonarios*	20	11	3	6	36	23	36
Deportes Tolima*	20	9	9	2	25	13	36
Junior*	20	8	9	3	25	21	33
Deportivo Pereira*	20	9	6	5	24	21	33
Alianza Petrolera*	20	8	7	5	27	18	31
Deportivo Cali*	20	8	7	5	27	21	31
America de Cali*	20	8	5	7	25	19	29
Envigado	20	7	6	7	24	23	27
Atletico Bucaramanga	20	7	6	7	26	29	27
Jaguares	20	7	6	7	23	26	27
Independiente Medellin	20	5	11	4	14	15	26
Aguilas Doradas	20	7	4	9	24	25	25
Santa Fe	20	6	7	7	21	22	25
La Equidad	20	6	7	7	20	21	25
Deportes Quindio	20	6	4	10	18	24	22
Once Caldas	20	5	5	10	18	30	20
Patriotas Boyaca	20	4	6	10	14	21	18
Deportivo Pasto	20	4	4	12	13	28	16
Atletico Huila	20	2	4	14	12	35	10

Top eight teams qualify for the semi-final groups

Group A Semi-Final

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Cali (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	6	13
Junior	6	1	4	1	9	8	7
Atletico Nacional	6	1	3	2	10	9	6
Deportivo Pereira	6	1	2	3	6	13	5

Group B Semi-Final

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportes Tolima (Q)	5	3	3	0	11	5	12
Millonarios	5	3	2	1	9	5	11
America de Cali	5	2	0	4	6	9	6
Alianza Petrolera	5	1	1	4	6	13	4

Final

Dec 19 – Palmira
Deportivo Cali 1 (Preciado 42)
Deportes Tolima 1 (Ramirez 60)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)

Dec 22 – Ibague
Deportes Tolima 1 (Quinones 14)
Deportivo Cali 2 (Vasquez 59, Preciado 75 pen)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ospina (Col)
Deportivo Cali win 3-2 on aggregate and are crowned champions

ECUADOR

First Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Emelec (Q)	15	10	4	1	29	14	34
Barcelona	15	9	4	2	31	13	31
Independiente del Valle	15	8	3	4	27	18	27
Universidad Catolica	15	7	4	4	29	18	25
Mushuc Runa	15	7	4	4	29	21	25
LDU Quito	15	6	7	2	22	19	25
Macara	15	6	5	4	17	17	23
9 de Octubre	15	6	2	7	22	21	20
Aucas	15	5	4	6	27	26	19
Delfin	15	4	6	5	19	25	18
Deportivo Cuenca	15	4	4	7	14	18	16
Manta	15	4	4	7	18	25	16
Tecnico Universitario	15	3	4	8	11	17	13
Orense	15	3	3	9	14	24	12
Guayaquil City	15	2	4	9	11	30	10
Olmedo*	15	2	6	7	13	27	9

Olmedo deducted three points

Second Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente del Valle (Q)	15	10	4	1	29	9	34
Emelec	15	9	3	3	30	15	30
9 de Octubre	15	9	3	3	25	17	30
Universidad Catolica	15	8	5	2	25	15	29
LDU Quito	15	6	5	4	27	22	23
Delfin	15	6	4	5	25	20	22
Tecnico Universitario	15	5	7	3	13	9	22
Aucas	15	5	5	5	20	17	20
Barcelona	15	6	2	7	20	20	20
Guayaquil City	15	6	2	7	16	18	20
Orense	15	4	7	4	14	13	19
Deportivo Cuenca	15	4	4	7	25	24	16
Mushuc Runa	15	4	4	7	12	21	16
Macara	15	3	4	8	18	29	13
Manta (R)*	15	2	6	7	11	21	12
Olmedo (R)*	15	0	1	14	9	49	1

Manta and Olmedo relegated based on aggregate points tally during the season

Final

Dec 5 – Sangolqui
Independiente del Valle 3 (Sornoza 22, 53 pen, Bauman 74)
Emelec 1 (S. Rodriguez 90+9 pen)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Quiroz (Ecu)

Dec 12 – Guayaquil
Emelec 1 (Arroyo 45+8)
Independiente del Valle 1 (Schunke 8)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Aragon (Ecu)
Independiente del Valle win 4-2 on aggregate and are crowned champions

PARAGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libertad (C)	18	12	2	4	36	15	38
Olimpia	18	10	3	5	34	23	33
Nacional	18	8	6	4	26	19	30
Cerro Porteno	18	8	4	6	24	22	28
Guairena	18	6	8	4	20	14	26
Club Guarani	18	7	4	7	24	27	25
12 de Octubre	18	5	7	6	20	25	22
Sportivo Luqueno	18	5	3	10	19	29	18
Sol de America	18	3	5	10	18	28	14
River Plate	18	2	6	10	13	32	12

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cerro Porteno (C)	18	11	5	2	27	8	38
Club Guarani	18	10	6	2	39	19	36
Sol de America	18	8	4	6	22	22	28
Libertad	18	7	6	5	32	21	27
12 de Octubre	18	5	6	7	18	22	21
Sportivo Luqueno (R)*	18	5	6	7	16	27	21
Nacional	18	4	8	6	17	25	20
Olimpia	18	6	0	12	24	29	18
Guairena	18	4	6	8	12	21	18
River Plate (R)*	18	4	5	9	15	28	17

River Plate and Sportivo Luqueno relegated based on average number of points earned per game over the past three seasons

PERU

Phase 1 Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universidad San Martin	9	6	1	2	10	6	19
Ayacucho	9	3	6	0	16	10	15
Universitario	9	4	3	2	12	11	15
Cienciano	9	4	2	3	14	12	14
Carlos Mannucci	9	3	3	3	13	14	12
Alianza Atletico	9	3	1	5	10	9	10
UTC Cajamarca	9	3	1	5	9	12	10
Academia Cantolao	9	3	1	5	8	13	10
Melgar	9	2	3	4	11	12	9

Phase 1 Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sporting Cristal (Q)*	9	8	0	1	18	6	24
Cesar Vallejo	9	5	3	1	17	8	18
Alianza Lima	9	4	4	1	12	6	16
Sport Huancayo	9	3	3	3	8	9	12
Sport Boys	9	3	1	5	12	14	10
Alianza Universidad	9	3	1	5	8	13	10
Cusco	9	1	5	3	12	13	8
Deportivo Municipal	9	2	1	6	6	15	7
Deportivo Binacional	9	1	1	7	8	21	4

Sporting Cristal qualify for final play-off after beating Universidad San Martin 2-0 in Phase 1 final

Phase 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza Lima (Q)	17	12	4	1	27	11	40
Sporting Cristal	17	10	4	3	39	23	34
Universitario	17	9	5	3	31	19	32
Melgar	17	9	4	4	34	15	31
Sport Boys	17	7	7	3	24	20	28
Cienciano	17	6	7	4	25	21	25
Deportivo Municipal	17	7	3	7	26	22	24
Cesar Vallejo	17	6	6	5	14	12	24
Carlos Mannucci	17	7	3	7	27	26	24
UTC Cajamarca	17	6	5	6	19	21	23
Ayacucho	17	6	4	7	21	26	22
Deportivo Binacional (R)*	17	6	3	8	24	29	21
Cusco	17	5	3	9	31	34	18
Sport Huancayo	17	3	9	5	18	21	18
Academia Cantolao	17	4	5	8	20	24	17
Alianza Atletico	17	4	3	10	21	37	15
Alianza Universidad (R)*	17	3	5	9	17	32	14
Universidad San Martin (R)*	17	1	4	12	8	33	7

Universidad San Martin, Alianza Universidad and Deportivo Binacional relegated based on aggregate points tally, with the latter relegated after losing to Carlos Stein 4-2 on pens in relegation play-off

Final Play-Off

Nov 21 – Lima
Alianza Lima 1 (Barcos 33)
Sporting Cristal 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Haro (Per)

Nov 28 – Lima
Sporting Cristal 0
Alianza Lima 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ortega (Per)
Alianza Lima win 1-0 on aggregate and are crowned champions

URUGUAY

Torneo Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plaza Colonia (Q)	15	11	3	1	20	7	36
Nacional	15	9	2	4	23	14	29
Penarol	15	7	7	1	22	10	28
Liverpool	15	8	3	4	38	20	27
River Plate	15	7	5	3	27	20	26
City Torque	15	8	1	6	26	19	25
Fenix	15	6	3	6	20	22	21
Cerro Largo	15	6	2	7	20	22	20
Cerrito	15	5	4	6	14	15	19
Sud America	15	5	3	7	15	22	18
Wanderers	15	5	2	8	12	16	17
Rentistas	15	4	4	7	12	21	16
Boston River	15	3	5	7	14	19	14
Deportivo Maldonado	15	3	5	7	11	22	14
Progreso	15	2	5	8	13	26	11
Villa Espanola	15	1	6	8	14	26	9

Torneo Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol (Q)	15	9	5	1	27	11	32
Nacional**	15	8	4	3	23	15	30
Wanderers	15	8	3	4	23	18	27
Cerro Largo**	15	6	9	0	24	11	26
City Torque	15	7	4	4	26	19	25
Progreso (R)*	15	7	4	4	12	7	25
Boston River	15	6	4	5	24	25	22
Cerrito	15	6	3	6	20	22	21
Plaza Colonia	15	5	5	5	20	18	20
Fenix	15	4	7	4	18	18	19
Deportivo Maldonado	15	5	2	8	13	18	17
River Plate	15	4	4	7	18	22	16
Liverpool	15	4	3	8	15	19	15
Rentistas	15	4	2	9	18	24	14
Sud America (R)*	15	3	4	8	14	26	13
Villa Espanola (R)*	15	1	3	11	12	34	6

Villa Espanola, Sud America and Progreso relegated based on average number of points earned per game over the past two seasons
**Nacional awarded two points and Cerro Largo deducted one point*

Championship Play-Off

Dec 7 – Montevideo
Plaza Colonia 1 (Lopez 35 pen)
Penarol 1 (Torres 40)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)
After Extra-Time. Penarol win 8-7 on pens and are crowned champions

VENEZUELA

Central Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo La Guaira*	24	10	8	6	33	22	38
Deportivo Lara*	24	8	10	6	42	30	34
Academia Puerto Cabello**	24	8	10	6	24	21	34
Aragua**	24	8	9	7	22	25	33
Gran Valencia	24	8	9	7	25	32	33
Carabobo	24	8	7	9	28	28	31
Yaracuyanos (R)	24	5	5	14	16	32	20

Top two qualify for Championship Round
**Third and fourth qualify for Play-Off Round*

Occidental Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira*	24	15	4	5	49	22	49
Estudiantes de Merida*	24	12	6	6	39	25	42
Portuguesa**	24	11	6	7	32	21	39
Hermanos Colmenarez**	24	8	12	4	43	35	36
Zamora	24	8	8	8	36	30	32
Zulia	24	8	7	9	37	32	31
Trujillanos (R)	24	0	1	23	8	79	1

Top two qualify for Championship Round
**Third and fourth qualify for Play-Off Round*

Oriental Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Caracas*	24	14	6	4	50	27	48
Monagas*	24	13	6	5	44	27	45
Metropolitanos**	24	9	8	7	42	31	35
Atletico Venezuela**	24	9	7	8	36	38	34
Universidad Central	24	8	7	9	32	30	31
Mineros de Guayana	24	8	5	11	25	33	29
LALA (R)	24	2	3	19	15	58	9

Top two qualify for Championship Round
**Third and fourth qualify for Play-Off Round*

Play-Off Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Metropolitanos	8	4	2	2	10	10	14
Hermanos Colmenarez	8	4	1	3	13	9	13
Portuguesa	8	2	4	2	9	7	10
Aragua	8	2	4	2	10	11	10
Academia Puerto Cabello	8	1	3	4	10	15	6
Atletico Venezuela*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Atletico Venezuela withdrew

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Caracas (Q)	10	5	3	2	20	6	18
Deportivo Tachira (Q)	10	5	3	2	14	9	18
Monagas	10	5	2	3	14	12	17
Deportivo Lara	10	2	5	3	10	9	11
Deportivo La Guaira	10	2	3	5	8	20	9
Estudiantes de Merida	10	2	2	6	12	22	8

Final

Dec 11 – Caracas
Deportivo Tachira 0
Caracas 0
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)
After Extra-Time. Deportivo Tachira win 4-2 on pens and are crowned champions

ASIA

JAPAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kawasaki Frontale (C)	38	28	8	2	81	28	92
Yokohama F. Marinos	38	24	7	7	82	35	79
Vissel Kobe	38	21	10	7	62	36	73
Kashima Antlers	38	21	6	11	62	36	69
Nagoya Grampus	38	19	9	10	44	30	66
Urawa Reds	38	18	9	11	45	38	63
Sagan Tosu	38	16	11	11	43	35	59
Avispa Fukuoka	38	14	12	12	42	37	54
FC Tokyo	38	15	8	15	49	53	53
Consadole Sapporo	38	14	9	15	48	50	51
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	38	12	13	13	44	42	49
Cerezo Osaka	38	13	9	16	47	51	48
Gamba Osaka	38	12	8	18	33	49	44
Shimizu S-Pulse	38	10	12	16	37	54	42
Kashiwa Reysol	38	12	5	21	37	56	41
Shonan Bellmare	38	7	16	15	36	41	37
Tokushima Vortis (R)	38	10	6	22	34	55	36
Oita Trinita (R)	38	9	8	21	31	55	35
Vegalta Sendai (R)	38	5	13	20	31	62	28
Yokohama FC (R)	38	6	9	23	32	77	27

SOUTH KOREA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeonbuk Motors (C)	38	22	10	6	71	37	76
Ulsan Hyundai	38	21	11	6	64	41	74
Daegu FC	38	15	10	13	41	48	55
Jeju United	38	13	15	10	52	44	54
Suwon FC	38	14	9	15	53	57	51
Suwon Bluewings	38	12	10	16	42	50	46

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Seoul FC	38	12	11	15	46	46	47
Incheon United	38	12	11	15	38	45	47
Pohang Steelers	38	12	10	16	41	45	46
Seongnam FC	38	11	11	16	34	46	44
Gangwon FC*	38	10	13	15	40	51	43
Gwangju FC (R)	38	10	7	21	42	54	37

Gangwon FC won relegation play-off v Daejeon Hana Citizen 4-2 on aggregate

TAIWAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tainan City (C)	14	11	1	2	40	12	34
Taipower	14	9	4	1	25	6	31
Taichung Futuro	14	8	2	4	20	11	26
Hang Yuan	14	7	4	3	19	13	25
Tatung	14	5	3	6	20	22	18
Taiwan CPC	14	4	2	8	18	24	14
Zhanyi Skywalkers*	14	1	2	11	2	23	5
NTUPES (R)	14	1	2	11	8	41	5

Zhanyi Skywalkers enter relegation play-off against Ming Chuan University

TAJIKISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Istiklol (C)	27	21	5	1	78	9	68
Khujand	27	17	4	6	52	26	55
CSKA Pomir	27	12	8	7	37	29	44
Istaravshan	27	12	6	9	30	25	42
Khatlon	27	10	6	11	30	33	36
Eskhata	27	9	3	15	33	49	30
Fayzkand	27	8	5	14	20	37	29
Ravshan	27	7	8	12	27	35	29
Kuktosh (R)	27	7	5	15	38	58	26
Dushanbe-83 (R)	27	4	6	17	23	67	18

OCEANIA

FIJI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lautoka (C)	14	9	3	2	22	11	30
Rewa	14	7	4	3	20	11	25
Ba	14	6	4	4	22	11	22
Suva	14	6	3	5	16	11	21
Labasa	14	4	7	3	9	12	19
Nadi	14	3	6	5	14	24	15
Navua	14	2	3	9	10	21	9
Nadroga (R)	14	1	6	7	10	22	9

NEW ZEALAND

Northern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City	18	15	1	2	63	19	46
Auckland United	19	10	5	4	42	25	35
Eastern Suburbs	19	10	4	5	31	21	34
Birkenhead United	19	10	3	6	50	33	33
Western Springs	18	8	4	6	44	35	28
Bay Olympic	18	7	4	7	26	38	25
Hamilton Wanderers	18	6	5	7	35	44	23
Manukau United	19	5	7	7	33	35	22
North Shore United	19	5	7	7	35	40	22
Melville United	19	6	3	10	24	40	21
Northern Rovers	19	2	5	12	22	41	11
West Coast Rangers	19	3	2	14	18	52	11

Season ended early and Northern League teams were unable to qualify for the Championship Phase due to COVID-19 alert levels

Central League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wellington Olympic*	18	15	2	1	59	18	47
Miramar Rangers*	18	13	3	2	64	17	42
Lower Hutt City*	18	13	2	3	70	26	41
Western Suburbs*	18	9	4	5	46	25	31
Wairarapa United	18	6	6	6	37	44	24
Waterside Karori	18	6	4	8	31	42	22
Napier City Rovers	18	5	2	11	37	51	17
North Wellington	18	4	4	10	46	57	16
Petone	18	4	0	14	27	68	12
Wainuiomata	18	1	1	16	17	86	4

Wellington Olympic, Miramar & Western Suburbs qualify for South Central Championship Phase. Lower Hutt City cannot qualify due to their Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Wellington Phoenix Reserves

Southern League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cashmere Technical*	7	6	0	1	25	7	18
Selwyn United*	7	4	1	2	14	12	13
South City Royals	7	4	0	3	15	16	12
Otago University	7	4	0	3	14	15	12
Christchurch United	7	3	1	3	20	15	10
Coastal Spirit	7	3	0	4	12	12	9
Nelson Suburbs	7	1	1	5	10	17	4
Green Island	7	1	1	5	11	27	4

Cashmere Technical and Selwyn United qualify for South Central Championship Phase

South Central Championship Phase

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Miramar Rangers (Q)	5	3	2	0	13	10	11
Wellington Olympic (Q)	5	3	1	1	15	13	10
Cashmere Technical	5	3	0	2	8	4	9

Wellington Phoenix Reserves	5	2	0	3	15	8	6
Western Suburbs	5	2	0	3	6	11	6
Selwyn United	5	0	1	4	4	15	1

Grand Final

Dec 12 – Wellington
Miramar Rangers 7 (Simes 8, Mason-Smith 24, Whyte 27, 39, Delhommelle 52, Midgley 59, Moreira 87)
Wellington Olympic 2 (Bouzoukis 19, Chore 31)
HT: 4-2. **Ref:** Kawana-Waugh (Nzl)
Miramar Rangers are crowned premiers

CONCACAF

2021 CONCACAF LEAGUE

Final 1st leg

Dec 8 – Tegucigalpa
Motagua 1 (Moreira 41)
Comunicaciones 2 (Aparicio 22, Anangono 79)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Nation (Jam)

Final 2nd leg

Dec 14 – Guatemala City
Comunicaciones 4 (Anangono 42, 45+1, 66, Lacayo 54)
Motagua 2 (Moreira 4, Vega 27)
HT: 2-2. **Ref:** Santander (Mex)
Comunicaciones win 6-3 on aggregate

MEXICO

2021 Apertura Championship Stage

Reclassification

Nov 20 – Torreon
Santos Laguna 2 (Preciado 62, Jeraldino 86 pen)
Atletico San Luis 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)

Nov 20 – Puebla
Puebla 2 (Tabo 20 pen, Lucas Maia 89)
Guadalajara 2 (Brizuela 6, Mayorga 62)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)
After Extra-Time. Puebla win 6-5 on pens

Nov 21 – Toluca
Toluca 1 (Ortega 62 pen)
UNAM Pumas 1 (Lopez 16, Dinenno 50)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Gomez (Mex)

Nov 21 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul 1 (Yotun 32 pen)
Monterrey 4 (Funes Mori 10 pen, 59, Meza 27, Janssen 85)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Guerrero (Mex)

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 24 – Mexico City
UNAM Pumas 0
America 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Perez (Mex)

Nov 24 – Guadalupe
Monterrey 0
Atlas 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Rojas (Mex)

Nov 25 – Puebla
Puebla 2 (Parra 30, Araujo 79)
Leon 1 (Barreiro 28)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Miranda (Mex)

Nov 25 – Torreon
Santos Laguna 2 (Valdes 4, Aguirre 12)
UANL Tigres 1 (Gignac 74)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Romo (Mex)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 27 – Mexico City
America 1 (Aguilera 11 pen)
UNAM Pumas 3 (Corozo 29, 42, Higor 82)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)
UNAM Pumas win 3-1 on aggregate

Nov 27 – Guadalajara
Atlas 1 (Furch 18 pen)
Monterrey 1 (Gonzalez 73)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)
1-1 on aggregate. Atlas advance due to finishing higher in the league table

Nov 28 – San Nicolas
UANL Tigres 1 (Salcedo 82)
Santos Laguna 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Santander (Mex)
2-2 on aggregate. UANL Tigres advance due to finishing higher in the league table

Nov 28 – Leon
Leon 2 (Mena 25, 80 pen)
Puebla 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Perez (Mex)
Leon win 3-2 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 1 – San Nicolas
UANL Tigres 2 (Thauvin 90, Gonzalez 90+5)
Leon 1 (Meneses 57)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)

Dec 2 – Mexico City
UNAM Pumas 0
Atlas 1 (Furch 43)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Rojas (Mex)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 4 – Leon
Leon 2 (Mena 8, 85)
UANL Tigres 1 (Reyes 16)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)
3-3 on aggregate. Leon advance due to finishing higher in the league table

Dec 5 – Guadalajara
Atlas 0
UNAM Pumas 1 (Dinenno 76)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Perez (Mex)
1-1 on aggregate. Atlas advance due to finishing higher in the league table

Final – 1st Leg

Dec 9 – Leon
Leon 3 (Davila 32, Mena 78, 86 pen)
Atlas 2 (Reyes 11, Furch 65)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Santander (Mex)

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 12 – Guadalajara
Atlas 1 (Rocha 55)
Leon 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)
After Extra-Time. Atlas win 4-3 on pens and are crowned champions

UNITED STATES

2021 MLS Play-Offs

First Round – Eastern Conference

Nov 20 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 1 (Glesnes 120+3)
New York Red Bulls 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bazakos (USA)
After Extra-Time

Nov 21 – New York
New York City 2 (Castellanos 49, Callens 53)
Atlanta United 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Penso (USA)

Nov 23 – Nashville
Nashville SC 3 (Mukhtar 21, 74, Cadiz 90+4)
Orlando City 1 (Dike 14)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Elfath (USA)

First Round – Western Conference

Nov 20 – Kansas City
Sporting Kansas City 3 (Shelton 17, Isimat-Mirin 45+3, Zusi 58)
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Dajome 39 pen)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Kelly (USA)

Nov 21 – Portland
Portland Timbers 3 (Mabiala 43, Blanco 47, 66)
Minnesota United 1 (Fragapane 11)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Villarreal (USA)

Nov 23 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 0
Real Salt Lake 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Dickerson (USA)
After Extra-Time. Real Salt Lake win 6-5 on pens

Semi-Finals – Eastern Conference

Nov 28 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 1 (Gazdag 45+2)
Nashville SC 1 (Mukhtar 38)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Chapman (USA)
After Extra-Time. Philadelphia Union win 2-0 on pens

Nov 30 – Foxborough
New England Revolution 2 (Buksa 9, Buchanan 118)
New York City 2 (Rodriguez 3, Castellanos 109)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fischer (USA)
After Extra-Time. New York City win 5-3 on pens

Semi-Finals – Western Conference

Nov 25 – Commerce City
Colorado Rapids 0
Portland Timbers 1 (Mabiala 90)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Unkel (USA)

Nov 28 – Kansas City
Sporting Kansas City 1 (Russell 24 pen)
Real Salt Lake 2 (Julio 72, Wood 90+1)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Stott (USA)

Final – Eastern Conference

Dec 5 – Chester
Philadelphia Union 1 (Callens 63 og)
New York City 2 (Moralez 65, Magno 88)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Unkel (USA)

Final – Western Conference

Dec 4 – Portland
Portland Timbers 2 (Mora 5, Moreno 61)
Real Salt Lake 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Kelly (USA)

2021 MLS Cup

Dec 11 – Portland
Portland Timbers 1 (Mora 90+4)
New York City 1 (Castellanos 41)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Villarreal (USA)
After Extra-Time. New York City win 4-2 on pens

Internationals

2021 FIFA ARAB CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Nov 30 – Al Wakrah
Iraq 1 (Abdulkareem 90+8 pen)
Oman 1 (Al Yahyaei 78 pen)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Martinez (Hon)

Nov 30 – Al Khor
Qatar 1 (Hatem 69)
Bahrain 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)

Dec 3 – Doha
Bahrain 0
Iraq 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sikazwe (Zam)

Dec 3 – Al Rayyan
Oman 1 (Al Hajri 74)
Qatar 2 (Afif 32 pen, Durbin 90+7 pen)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)

Dec 6 – Al Rayyan
Oman 3 (R. Al Alawi 41, A. Al Alawi 50, Al Hajri 59)
Bahrain 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Sato (Jap)

Dec 6 – Al Khor
Qatar 3 (Ali 82, Afif 84, Al Haydos 90+4)
Iraq 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gassama (Gam)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar (Q)	3	3	0	0	6	1	9
Oman (Q)	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Iraq	3	0	2	1	1	4	2
Bahrain	3	0	1	2	0	4	1

Group B

Nov 30 – Al Rayyan
Tunisia 5 (Jaziri 39, 45+2, Ben Larbi 42, 51, Msakni 90+1)
Mauritania 1 (Bessam 45+12 pen)
HT: 3-1. **Ref:** Faghani (Irn)

Nov 30 – Doha
United Arab Emirates 2 (Caio 24, Saleh 30)
Syria 1 (Al Salama 60)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Sikazwe (Zam)

Dec 3 – Doha
Mauritania 0
United Arab Emirates 1 (Ibrahim 90+3)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Matonte (Uru)

Dec 3 – Al Khor
Syria 2 (Kass Kawo 4, Anz 47)
Tunisia 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Gomez (Mex)

Dec 6 – Al Wakrah
Syria 1 (Al Baher 52)
Mauritania 2 (Soueid 50, Tanjy 90+5)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)

Dec 6 – Doha
Tunisia 1 (Jaziri 10)
United Arab Emirates 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Siebert (Ger)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	3	6
UAE (Q)	3	2	0	1	3	2	6
Syria	3	1	0	2	4	4	3
Mauritania	3	1	0	2	3	7	3

Group C

Dec 1 – Al Wakrah
Morocco 4 (Nahiri 31, Hafidi 56, 64, Benoun 87 pen)
Palestine 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Conger (Nzl)

Dec 1 – Al Rayyan
Saudi Arabia 0
Jordan 1 (K. Al Dawsari 62 og)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gassama (Gam)

Dec 4 – Al Rayyan
Jordan 0
Morocco 4 (Jabrane 4, Benoun 25, Chibi 45+3, Rahimi 88 pen)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Tello (Arg)

Dec 4 – Al Rayyan
Palestine 1 (Rashid 45+2)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Hamdan 81)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Martinez (Hon)

Dec 7 – Doha
Morocco 1 (El Berkaoui 45+4 pen)
Saudi Arabia 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Matonte (Uru)

Dec 7 – Doha
Jordan 5 (Abdel-Rahman 9 pen, Al Dardour 24, Al Mardi 82, Al Naimat 86, 90+1)
Palestine 1 (Seyam 44)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Faghani (Irn)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	0	9
Jordan (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	5	6
Saudi Arabia	3	0	1	2	1	3	1
Palestine	3	0	1	2	2	10	1

Group D

Dec 1 – Al Rayyan
Algeria 4 (Bounedjah 17, 37, Benlamri 43, Soudani 46)
Sudan 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Sato (Jap)

Dec 1 – Doha
Egypt 1 (Afsha 71 pen)
Lebanon 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Siebert (Ger)

Dec 4 – Al Wakrah
Lebanon 0
Algeria 2 (Brahimi 69 pen, Meziani 90+3)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)

Dec 4 – Doha
Sudan 0
Egypt 5 (Refaat 4, Zizo 13 pen, El Wensh 31, H. Faisal 57, Sherif 80)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Conger (Nzl)

Dec 7 – Al Wakrah
Algeria 1 (Tougai 20)
Egypt 1 (El Solia 60 pen)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Tello (Arg)

Dec 7 – Al Rayyan
Lebanon 1 (Abu Eshrein 76 og)
Sudan 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gomez (Mex)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
Algeria (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
Lebanon	3	1	0	2	1	3	3
Sudan	3	0	0	3	0	10	0

Quarter-Finals

Dec 10 – Al Rayyan
Tunisia 2 (Jaziri 16, Msakni 69)
Oman 1 (A. Al Alawi 66)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Siebert (Ger)

Dec 10 – Al Khor
Qatar 5 (Salmeen 6 og, Ali 28 pen, 45+3, Khoukhi 36 pen, Hatem 44)
United Arab Emirates 0
HT: 5-0. **Ref:** Matonte (Uru)

Dec 11 – Al Wakrah
Egypt 3 (Hamdy 45+1, Refaat 100, Dawoud 119)
Jordan 1 (Al Naimat 12)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Martinez (Hon)
After Extra-Time

Dec 11 – Doha
Morocco 2 (Nahiri 64, Benoun 111)
Algeria 2 (Brahimi 62 pen, Belaili 102)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)
After Extra-Time. Algeria win 5-3 on pens

Semi-Finals

Dec 15 – Doha
Tunisia 1 (El Solia 90+5 og)
Egypt 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Faghani (Irn)

Dec 15 – Doha
Qatar 1 (Muntari 90+7)
Algeria 2 (Benayada 59, Belaili 90+17)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)

Third-Place Play-Off

Dec 18 – Doha
Egypt 0
Qatar 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Tello (Arg)
After Extra-Time. Qatar win 5-4 on pens

Final

Dec 18 – Al Khor
Tunisia 0
Algeria 2 (Sayoud 99, Brahimi 120+5)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Siebert (Ger)
After Extra-Time

2020 SUZUKI CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Dec 5 – Kallang
Timor-Leste 0
Thailand 2 (Pathompol 51, Supachok 81)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Al Hatmi (Oma)

Dec 5 – Kallang
Singapore 3 (Safuwan 34, Ikhsan 39, 45+1)
Myanmar 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Al Ali (Jor)

Dec 8 – Kallang
Myanmar 2 (Than Paing 16, Maung Maung Lwin 50)
Timor-Leste 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Al Adba (Qat)

Dec 8 – Kallang
Philippines 1 (Nazari 69)
Singapore 2 (Harun 61, Ramli 63)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kim Dae-yong (Kor)

Dec 11 – Kallang
Timor-Leste 0
Philippines 7 (Steuble 21, Nazari 31, Guirado 35, Reichelt 40, Nyholm 45, Maranon 45+1, Ingreso 78)
HT: 0-6. **Ref:** Nasaruddin (Mas)

Dec 11 – Kallang
Thailand 2 (Teerasil 23, 53 pen, Worachit 78 Supachok 90+2)
Myanmar 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Al Alhunfush (Ksa)

Dec 14 – Kallang
Philippines 1 (Reichelt 57)
Thailand 2 (Teerasil 26, 78 pen)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Al Hatmi (Oma)

Dec 14 – Kallang
Singapore 2 (Adam 4, Shakir 70)
Timor-Leste 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Al Hoaish (Ksa)

Dec 18 – Kallang
Thailand 2 (Elias 31, Supachai 45+2)
Singapore 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Ibrahim (Jor)

Dec 18 – Bishan
Myanmar 2 (Htet Phyo Wai 74, 86)
Philippines 3 (Maranon 16, 19, 45)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Al Hoaish (Ksa)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand (Q)	4	4	0	0	10	1	12
Singapore (Q)	4	3	0	1	7	3	9
Philippines	4	2	0	2	12	6	6
Myanmar	4	1	0	3	4	10	3
Timor-Leste	4	0	0	4	0	13	0

Group B

Dec 6 – Bishan
Cambodia 1 (Rosib 90 pen)
Malaysia 3 (Safawi 23 pen, Akhyar 61, Kogileswaran 78)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Al Alhunfush (Ksa)

Dec 6 – Bishan
Laos 0
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Cong Phuong 26, Phan Van Duc 55)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Ibrahim (Jor)

Dec 9 – Bishan
Malaysia 4 (Safawi 7, 34, 80, Shahrul 78)
Laos 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Mahfoodh (Bah)

Dec 9 – Bishan
Indonesia 4 (Irianto 5, 33, Evan 17, Rumakiek 54)
Cambodia 2 (Safy 37, Mony Udom 60)
HT: 3-1. **Ref:** Abdul Baki (Oma)

Dec 12 – Bishan
Laos 1 (Souvanny 41)
Indonesia 5 (Asnawi 23 pen, Irfan 34, Witan 56, Walian 77, Evan 84)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Kim Hee-gon (Kor)

Dec 12 – Bishan
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Quang Hai 32, Nguyen Cong Phuong 36, Nguyen Hoang Duc 89)
Malaysia 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Al Ali (Jor)

Dec 15 – Bishan
Cambodia 3 (Vathanaka 31, 41, Chanthea 74)
Laos 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** A'Qashah (Sin)

Dec 15 – Bishan
Indonesia 0
Vietnam 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kim Dae-yong (Kor)

Dec 19 – Bishan
Vietnam 4 (Nguyen Tien Linh 3, 27, Bui Tien Dung 55, Nguyen Quang Hai 57)
Cambodia 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Abdul Baki (Oma)

Dec 19 – Kallang
Malaysia 1 (Kogileswaran 13)
Indonesia 4 (Irfan 36, 43, Arhan 50, Baggott 82)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Mahfoodh (Bah)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Indonesia (Q)	4	3	1	0	13	4	10
Vietnam (Q)	4	3	1	0	9	0	10
Malaysia	4	2	0	2	8	8	6
Cambodia	4	1	0	3	6	11	3
Laos	4	0	0	4	1	14	0

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 22 – Kallang
Singapore 1 (Ikhsan 70)
Indonesia 1 (Witan 28)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Kim Hee-gon (Kor)

Dec 23 – Kallang
Vietnam 0
Thailand 2 (Chanathip 14, 23)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Al Adba (Qat)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 25 – Kallang
Indonesia 4 (Walian 11, Arhan 87, Shawal 91 og, Egy 105+2)
Singapore 2 (Song Ui-young 45+4, Shahdan 74)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Al Hatmi (Oma)
AET. Indonesia win 5-3 on aggregate

Dec 26 – Kallang
Thailand 0
Vietnam 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ibrahim (Jor)
Thailand win 2-0 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

Dec 29 – Kallang
Indonesia 0
Thailand 4 (Chanathip 2, 52, Supachok 67, Bordin 83)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Al Alhunfush (Ksa)

Final – 2nd Leg

Jan1 – Kallang
Thailand 2 (Adisak 54, Sarach 56)
Indonesia 2 (Kamuaya 7, Egy 80)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Al Ali (Jor)
Thailand win 6-2 on aggregate

FRIENDLIES

Nov 25 – Belek
Indonesia 4 (Kambuaya 5, Jaya 12, Sulaeman 33, Walian 55 pen)
Myanmar 1 (Maung Lwin 73)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Ugurlu (Tur)

Dec 5 – Houston
El Salvador 1 (Villalobos 43)
Ecuador 1 (Carcelen 18)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Solano (Dom)

Dec 9 – Austin
Mexico 2 (Gimenez 9, Silva 64)
Chile 2 (Morales 21, Parra 86)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Brown (Hon)

Dec 9 – Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 0
Uganda 2 (Asaba 71, Vuni 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kayoko (Tan)

Dec 12 – Los Angeles
El Salvador 0
Chile 1 (Vegas 90+5)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Lauziere (Can)

Dec 19 – Carson
United States 1 (Bassett 89)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Herrera (Crc)

February 2022 *Vol. 62 No. 6*

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PICTURES
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SPECIAL THANKS THIS ISSUE TO:
Keir Radnedge & Michael Fagan

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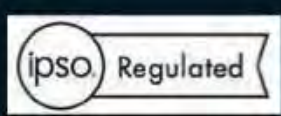


Paul McGrath

Italy 0 Republic of Ireland 1

1994 World Cup, USA

It has gone down in Irish sporting folklore as one of the finest performances in the history of the national team, yet Paul McGrath admits he should never have started his country's famous 1-0 group-stage win over Italy at USA '94...

"I shouldn't have been anywhere near a football pitch that day, that's the reality.

It's amazing to me that people look back on the Italy game as my greatest performance, but I come at it from a very different angle.

As I look back now, I have to ask myself: how the hell did I do that? There was no way I felt I could get through the game and perform anywhere near my best given the condition I was in.

To be blunt, I was not fit to play and we all knew that. Our manager Jack Charlton knew it, I knew it, and if the Italian players had eyes, they would have worked it out very quickly: my left arm was basically immobile.

The lads were all laughing at me in training because I had this shoulder problem that was not resolved and it meant I could barely lift my arm up.

It was only Jack's assistant Mick Byrne and some of the coaching staff that convinced him – and to a certain extent, me – to get out there and play against Italy.

Then you find yourself walking out at Giants Stadium and I remember thinking to myself: "This is just ridiculous. I shouldn't be here." My arm was swinging beside me and I'm trying to play a World Cup match against one of the tournament favourites.

To be up against Roberto Baggio in his prime and a dangerous forward in Giuseppe Signori made the task all the more difficult, but somehow I got through it and somehow, we won.

All I can say about that day at Giants Stadium was Phil Babb must have had the game of his life alongside me in the defence to make me look good. Phil was outstanding that afternoon and covered a lot of ground for me because when you are operating with one arm, it affects your movement on a number of levels, but I got through it.

It all fell into place for us in the biggest competition of them all. Ray Houghton's wonderful goal put us into a lead early on and I remember thinking then that we had a chance to get a draw in the game if we could hang on to the lead for a while.

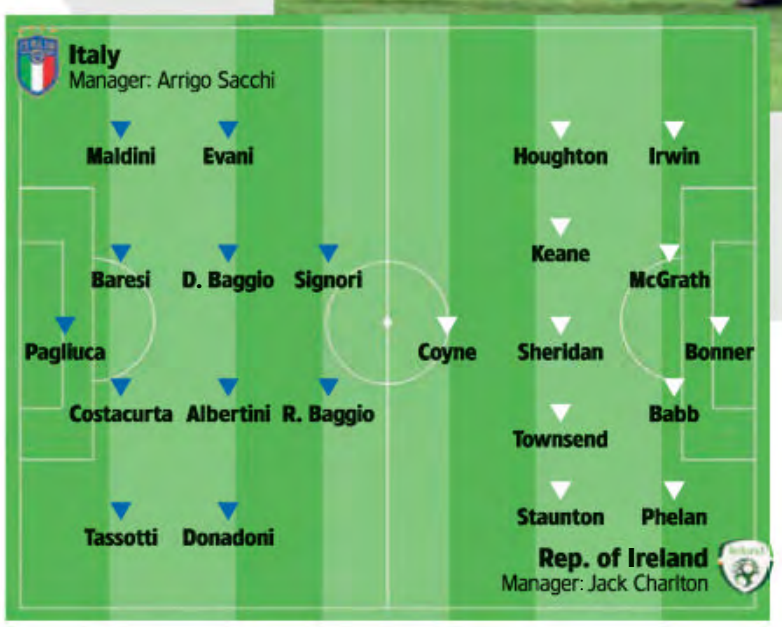
We got to half-time ahead and, as the minutes ticked down in the second half, you start to wonder if something incredible is going to happen. When we got to the end of the game, you have to convince yourself you have won.

All these years later, people come up to me talking about that game and what we could have done in that World Cup and there is some frustration for me, especially in the way we went out against the Netherlands in the last-16 game. We made too many mistakes that day, but the heat and so many more factors were working against us.

Yet when Ireland fans think of USA '94, and especially those who filled that Giants Stadium, the Italy game will be a memory that will stick with them forever. I'm proud to have played a part in the story."

Interview by Kevin Palmer

Unbeatable...McGrath challenges Italy's Giuseppe Signori



Competing... McGrath watches on as Roy Keane wins the ball

> As I look back now, I have to ask myself: how the hell did I do that?

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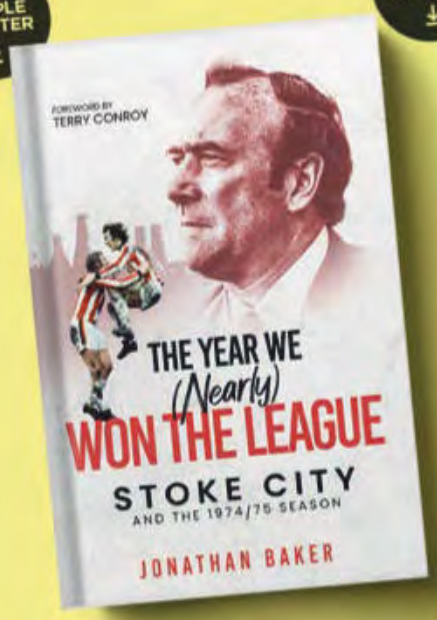

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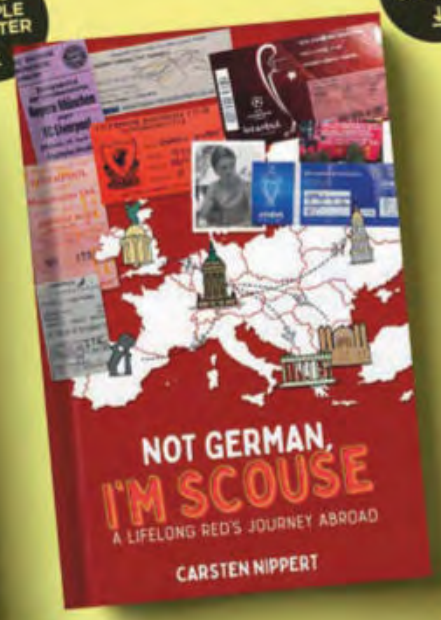

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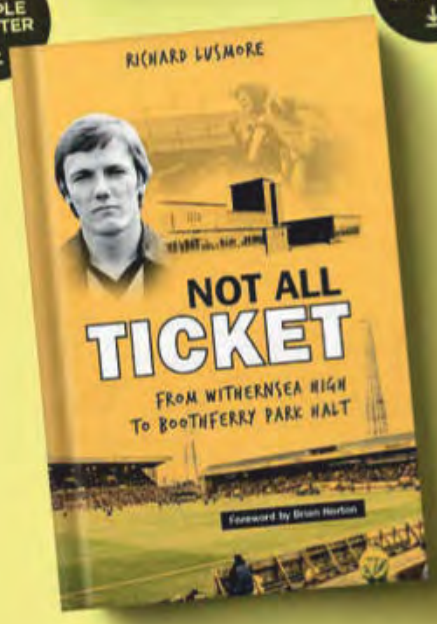

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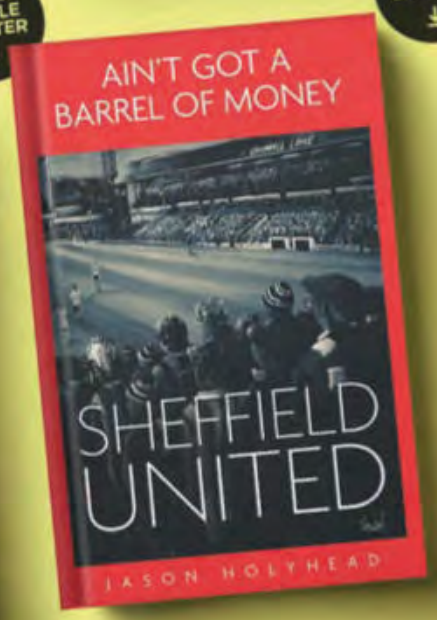

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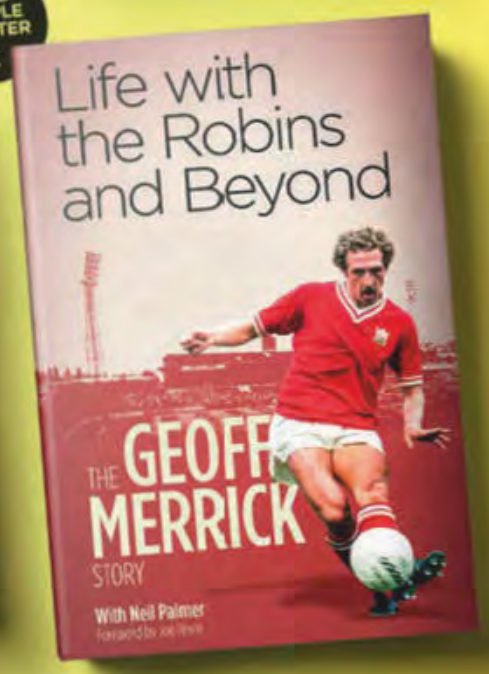

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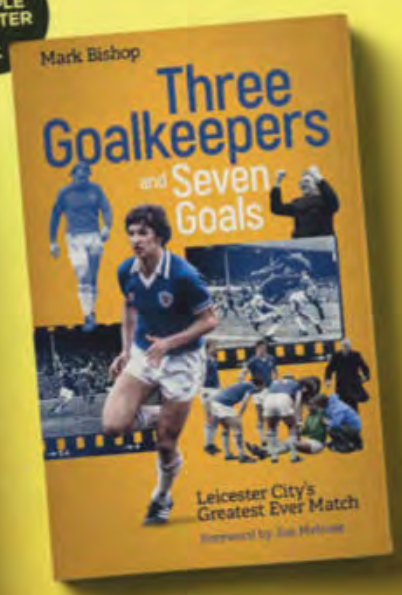

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